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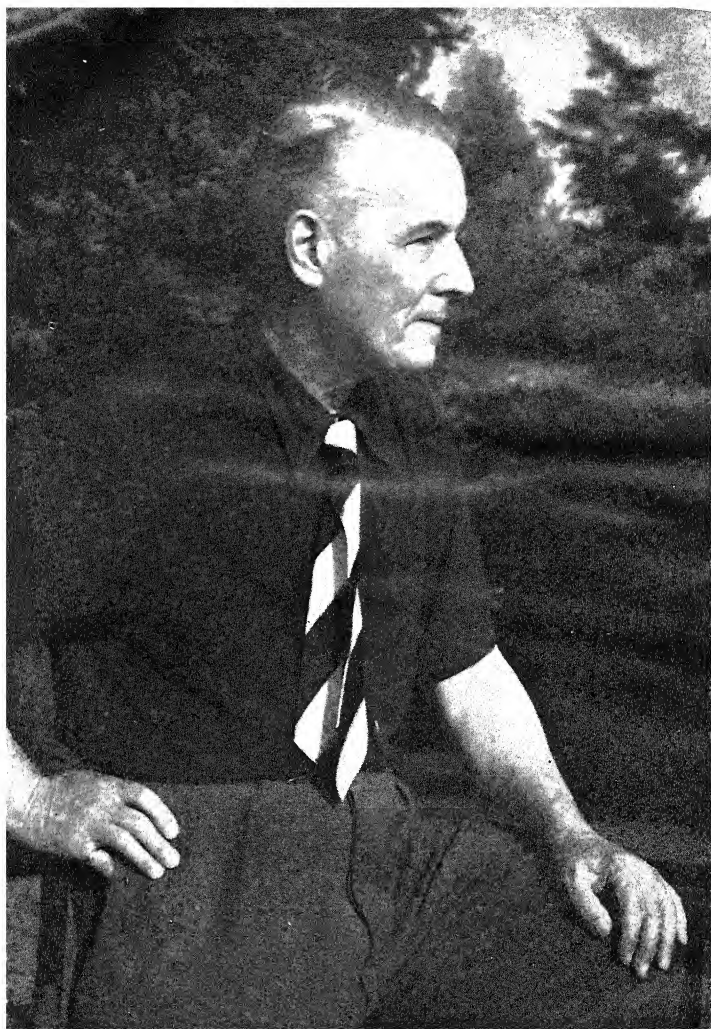
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Robert W. Service

# PLOUGHMAN OF THE MOON

AN ADVENTURE INTO MEMORY

BY  
ROBERT W. SERVICE



LONDON  
ERNEST BENN LIMITED

1946

■

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER

*Full of rich earthiness, a Grand Old Guy,  
With all his faults a better man than I.*

*Printed in Great Britain by  
Billing and Sons Ltd., Guildford and Esher*

F4739

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THOUGH NAMES I CHANGE FROM TIME TO TIME,  
A STICKLER FOR CORRECTNESS I'M.  
TO WRITE GOD-HONEST TRUTH I STRIVE,  
AND HERE, TO BEST OF MEMORY, I'VE.

Pedlar of dream-stuff, piping an empty tune;  
Fisher of shadows, Ploughman of the Moon.

*Verlaine.*

■

BOOK ONE

*CHILDHOOD*

■





## Chapter One

### THE LONG GREY TOWN

“PLEASE, Aunt Jeannie, can I go out and look at the hens?”  
Over her spectacles my aunt gazed at me suspiciously. “Whit fur, Rubbert Wullie, do you want to look at the hens?”  
“I don’t know whit fur, I jist want to look at them.”  
“Ye’d be faur better lookin’ at yer bonnie Bible. Don’t ye like yer wee Bible?”

“Ay, but I like the hens better.”

My aunt was inclined to be shocked; however, I was paying her a pretty compliment, for her Plymouth Rocks were her heart’s pride. Still she hesitated; when Grandfather, peering from under his spectacles, broke in.

“Whit fur will ye no’ let wee Wullie look at the hens? He’ll no dae them ony harm.”

My aunt seemed doubtful. To her my capacity for doing harm was only limited by my awakeness. Grudgingly she consented, and no released prisoner ever sighed with more profound relief. It was the afternoon of the Sabbath and I was richly miserable. My new boots pinched me, my white collar choked me. My hair was smugly flat, my Sunday suit skin-tight. My winter woollens were prickly, while my thick stockings made my legs itch. For a boy of five could worse torture be conceived?

How well I remember that little parlour! The furniture, padded with horsehair, was glossy black. Antimacassars draped arm-chairs and sofa, while on the wall was Moses in the Bulrushes, done in coloured wool by Aunt Jeannie. The book-case was grim with volumes of sermons, and the pendulum of the grandfather’s clock swung with relentless austerity. Under a glass bell was a collection of wax fruits—apples, pears, peaches, grapes. I had never tasted the last two, but as I gazed at them my mouth watered. Could they be as delicious as they looked?

My three aunts sat round the glowing fire. Aunt Jeannie was reading *Good Words*, Aunt Bella the *Quiver*, and Aunt Jennie *Sunday at Home*. The only reading I was allowed was Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, whose pictures of burning saints gave me a gruesome delight. My

aunts wore black silk skirts, and in front of the fire they drew them up over their knees. I was supposed to be too young to notice, but the fatness of their legs disgusted me. Grandfather would doze on the sofa till his snores awoke him. He had a crinkly white beard, and for long my idea of God was a grandiose edition of Grandfather.

I lived with him and my three aunts in the little Ayrshire town. Grandfather was postmaster; Aunt Bella sold stamps, while Aunt Jennie jiggled a handle that in some inconceivable way sent off telegrams. Aunt Jeannie ran the house and looked after the garden and the hens. All three were spinsters. They might have married, but they were jealous of each other, and when a man came "spierin'" one of them the others crabbed his style, so that the poor laddie gave up.

Gazing through the grating of the hen-yard, I regained my serenity. The hens calmed me. I liked them, all but the cock, a truculent bully, strutting amid his meek wives. I was angry when he would pounce on one of his consorts, jump on her back, and with pecks and flapping of wings flatten her to the ground. With stones I would go to the rescue, but one day Aunt Jeannie witnessed my intervention and stopped me.

"Leave him alone, he's no' hurtin' them," she said pensively. I recall to this day the look in her eyes. It seemed to say: "Oh, for a human rooster!"

For six days of the week I was happy, but the Sabbath was misery. We rose late. The house was hushed, the Post Office dark. Newspapers had been put away and whistling was forbidden. I asked Aunt Jeannie if I might whistle hymns, but she vetoed the idea. "Ye don't know the tunes well enough to stick to them," she objected. After breakfast of "parrich and finnan haddie" came preparation for church. All of us went, except one of my aunts who stayed to prepare lunch. Happy was I when I was sick enough to keep her company. Together we would stand behind the Nottingham lace curtains and watch the church-goers.

Our town consisted of a single street of whin-grey houses and was about two miles long. The population were church-goers to the last child. There were three churches, the Established, the Free and the U.P., and the rivalry between them was so bitter members of one denomination would scarcely speak to the others. We belonged to the Auld Kirk and looked down on the U.P. and the Free with disdain. We would not patronize a shopkeeper who did not belong to our sect, and Aunt Jeannie ceased to sell her eggs to a grocer when he became a "Wee Free."

About ten the bells began to ring, and from the far ends of the long town the worshippers formed into procession. It was a solemn

march, every one dressed in Sunday best, with face grave. Black was the dominant colour, and to show a bit of brightness was to shock convention. As they walked, their slow steps never faltered, while conversation consisted of side whispers; for all knew that behind the lace curtains of every house eyes were on them and tongues were wagging.

"Look! Mrs. McWhinnie's got a new bunnet, an' her man no' ten months pit awa'."

Or, "Puir auld Jimmie Purdie. His step's gettin' gey feeble. I'm thinkin' whuskey's no' sae good a cure for the rheumatics after a'."

Again: "Hoo changed yon Gillespie lass looks sin' she went to work in Glesca. I wonner if she's better than she ought to be. An' her mither deid o' the gallopin' consumption."

Always the same barbed remarks as the procession went by to the sound of bells. And how I loved to watch it when I got the chance! That wasn't often, though. Generally I was told to wash behind my ears, plaster down my hair, don my Sunday suit and get ready to join the throng. My aunts were busy putting the finishing touches to their black silk dresses and their bonnets with the crape and sequins. We were always in mourning, although the last death had occurred years before. When we were ready Aunt Jeannie's last act was to straighten my Glengarry bonnet, to which I had given a jaunty tilt. It was my new one. My school bonnet had neither ribands nor a "toorie," as one of my first acts on going to school was to tear off those sissy appendages. If questioned about the mutilation I would blame it on the older boys. Incidentally, my Sunday Glengarry had a red "toorie"; but Aunt Jeannie thought it wasn't proper for church, so she inked it black.

Grandfather preceded us to church by half an hour, because he stood by one of the plates where people piled their pennies. He donned a frock-coat, faded to green, and a ruffled top-hat that transformed him into a dignified elder. Last of all, he would slip into an inside pocket a "wee gill." From this the vestrymen would nip during the service, and on the rare occasions when Grandfather joined us in the pew he would be chewing a clove.

Before leaving, Aunt Jeannie would gaze at herself in the glass and pull faces till she finally achieved her Sabbath simper. As I trotted to church by her side, she would say: "Dinna kick the stanes, wee Wullie. An' tak' longer steps. Mind, ye've got on yer new boots." But my mind was on something else—the ordeal I dreaded, putting my penny in the plate. Really, it was a ha'penny, for only grown-ups gave pennies. Once I asked Aunt Jeannie why she gave me a ha'penny and she answered tartly: "Because I havena' got a farthin'."

The reason I dreaded putting my copper in the plate was Mister McCurdie. He was a crony of Grandfather's, and a great joker; but

to me he always presented a grim aspect. There were two doors leading into church and he stood at the right while Grandfather had the left. Grandfather on these occasions did not deign to recognize me, but Mister McCurdie's specs had a minatory glitter. It was through his door I had to pass, and there he stood behind his plate piled high with coppers. Occasionally a sixpence glimmered among them. Once, indeed, I saw a shilling; but that must have got in by mistake, and was regarded with exultant vigilance by both elders.

As I approached shrinkingly with my small coin, my Cerberus, towering down on me, would fix me with an accusing eye. Then one day he bent forward and whispered: "Look oot. I'm watchin' ye. Ye're yin o' they lads that pits in a penny an' tak's oot tippence." At this dreadful accusation I blushed and shrank away like a sneak-thief. After that, I held out my small coin at arm's length and dropped it from about a foot above the plate. Once it missed the edge and rolled to the floor, where I had to retrieve it. Cringing under his look of reprobation, I sneaked into church feeling as if all eyes were upon me, a suspected thief. I began to wonder if I really wasn't one. I felt fearfully in my pockets to see if no twopence were lurking there. I almost expected the minister to arise and denounce me from the pulpit.

Our pew was at the back of the church. It was of varnished pine and so constructed as to ensure a maximum of discomfort. The seats were narrow, the backs at an awkward angle to discourage drowsiness. In all the church there was not a cushion. When the congregation was seated, the bells ceased and the Minister entered, preceded by the Beadle, carrying the big Bible. Once, going up to the pulpit, the Minister tripped over his gown and said: "Tut! Tut!" His neck got very red; and always after that I watched eagerly, hoping he would trip again and say: "Tut! Tut!"

My aunts went to church early, so that they could see the others arrive. It was their great moment. Their eyes missed nothing, as they stored spicy comment for lunch-time conversation. Then we settled down to two hours of worship. At the prayers I was told to keep my head bent and close my eyes. But I dared to open them, for there was a brown knot in the wood in front of me that fascinated me. I tried to gouge it out under cover of the prayers, but even with my new pocket-knife I never succeeded.

The Minister, the Reverend Mister Lamb, had a bald head of lustrous polish and mutton-chop whiskers. Usually his discourse was prosy, but in inspired moments his voice rose to a yowl. This would occur at least once in every sermon, and I awaited the moment with an expectant thrill. Yet somehow, when it came I was secretly ashamed. Even at that age public displays of emotion embarrassed me. I felt

sorry for him because he felt so badly about sin and all that; but when he relapsed into dreariness again, I thought it would be a relief to hear him yowl.

By us he was looked upon as an Intellectual. Had he not preached a sermon entitled *Man and the Monkeys*, putting in his place a whipper-snapper of a scientist called Darwin, who had dared to voice a ridiculous theory utterly at odds with Holy teaching. Indeed, the congregation thought so much of it they had it printed as a pamphlet. But, whatever his other gifts, the Reverend Lamb was surely long-winded. Usually he began his sermon with *Firstly* and worked up to *Seventhly*. Then to my relief he would begin *Lastly*. But to my irritation he would go on to *Finally*. And when he would drone, "*In Conclusion*," I was too exhausted for further mental protest. Then, as I slumped on the bench, Aunt Jeannie would pass me a peppermint and a stern look that made me sit upright again. This peppermint was an extra, because at the beginning of the sermon we would each receive one. The custom was general. All round church you could see peppermints being passed, as if the congregation was bracing itself for an ordeal.

Returning home was so different from going to church. It was as if every one had been relieved of a burden. Duty grimly done, we walked joyously, heads high, eyes smiling. We formed groups, greeting, gossiping, even joking. At lunch Grandfather was pawky and aromatic, while my aunts discussed the sermon with critical comments on the garments of the other women. They knew what bonnets were retrimmed, what dresses dyed. Over the cold meat, rice and prunes, they tore their neighbours apart. Released from the strain of "unco guidness," every one became human again. . . . But the respite was short. Soon it was time for Sunday school. Aunt Jeannie had taught there for thirty years and was now Lady Superintendent. It was unthinkable I should ever miss, but really I did not dislike it. We had to memorize tiny texts printed on gilt tickets, and this I did with exultant ease. Besides, I enjoyed the hymns, which often had likeable tunes. Indeed, in later years I slightly altered some of the melodies and turned them into comic songs.

After Sunday school Aunt Jeannie usually suggested a walk to the cemetery. It was her idea of *divertissement*. There, hanging over tombs, she would sniffle and sigh. When at a certain point her handkerchief was produced, I hotly resented the dear departed; however, to her it was an orgy of sentiment she enjoyed to the last fat tear.

These childish memories may seem trivial, but they reveal traits that were to distinguish my whole life. To this day I shun graveyards

with their melancholy evocations; and I refuse to attend funerals, for in a few years I will have to be available at my own. But above all do I hold my horror of the Scotch Sabbath. Indeed, it has left me with a distaste for church-going of any kind. Yet I approve of piety . . . for others. Oh, yes, I send my cheque to the vicar and applaud those who hold down the family pew, but I would rather worship in my own kale-yard. If I am not a pillar of the church, I am, at least, one of the pagan columns that support it from outside.

## Chapter Two

### BAREFOOT BOY

**A**FTER the dour Sabbath came six days of joy. My grandfather and aunts must have been very kind to me, for I never remember being afraid of them. Aunt Jeannie was cross sometimes and shook me, but only once did she want me whipped. I cannot recall what I had done, though no doubt I deserved punishment. However, she had not the heart to do it herself, so she begged Grandfather to take action. He complied with bad grace. Calling me into his room and shutting the door, he swung a heavy strap.

"Bend over," he told me sternly. I was trembling, but I would not beg for mercy. I presented my little buttocks, expecting to feel the tang of the strap. I was determined not to cry. To my amazement he began to belabour the cushion of his chair.

"Greet, ye wee deevil," he hissed in my ear. "Pretend ye're greetin'."

So I bawled for all I was worth, while he whacked the cushion till the dust flew. Outside the door Aunt Jeannie was begging him to stop.

"The laddie's had enough," she shrieked.

"Dinna tell," said Grandfather; "but don't do it again. Next time I'll give ye a proper leatherin'."

I promised, and Aunt Jeannie greeted me with a look of commiseration. "Ye needna hae been sae brutal aboot it," she said to Grandfather, caressing my small posterior affectionately. But though they were gentle, my aunts were never demonstrative. Kissing was rarely practised. Sweethearts kissed and mothers kissed; but outside of that, osculation was taboo. I never saw any kissing in my family. If I had, I think I would have been shamed, for any show of emotion embarrassed me. We Scotch are a gritty race, with a habit of reserve.

I had another aunt who died when I was very young. She was little more than a girl, and I only remember her vaguely. I was always told not to go too near her. "Puir Aggie, she's got the consumption," they would whisper, but I couldn't understand. To me she was the loveliest of the family. She had such a waxen complexion and such



pink cheeks. She never did any work and often sat apart, brooding sadly. In these moods she would repulse me when I tried to caress her; but I think it was more from fear of infecting me than from any irritation she felt. Sometimes, however, as if yielding to an uncontrollable tenderness, she would hug me to her, and once she brought out some delicately written poems and read them to me. She said they were her own and I thought them beautiful.

To the others it must have been agony to see her fading away. Perhaps a southern climate would have helped her, but in our harsh Scotland she had not a chance. However, I doubt if we had the means to send her to Italy or Switzerland; and in any case such a thing was simply not done in our humble circles. She was regarded as doomed; we just waited for her to die. It was decided that she had better live in the little summer-house, and there a bed was installed for her. I remember I thought it was a jolly idea and I envied her, but she wept bitterly. From then on I would see little of her; though sometimes, through the black-currant bushes, I would glimpse her watching me haggardly. I tried to get in to her, but the door was barred.

Soon after that she died. They took her into the house towards the end and put her in the best bedroom. It had one of those stuffy enclosed beds; and there she sat, smoking some herbal cigarettes that were supposed to help her breathing. I laughed delightedly to see her smoking, but the others did not share my mirth. I recall the unearthly brightness of her eyes and the burning glow in her cheeks. She smoked her cigarettes like a real lady. Then, after a little, she asked if she might kiss me, and hugged me ever so tightly to her nightdress. And that night she died. . . .

As she lay in the best parlour we waited for the undertaker to screw her down. But before they closed the coffin I saw Grandfather rise and put his hand on her waxen brow, saying:

"Puir lassie . . . My wee Aggie . . . She's cauld, sae cauld."

Yet she lay there, indifferent to us all, victim of a sad destiny. She had not asked for life, and what a fate had been forced on her! What a burden she had borne so patiently! Oh, that one could make up to her for what she suffered! And there are so many like her. I did not understand then, but now I realize how stoically she awaited death who had never really known life.

When I was five I was sent to the parish school, because there was no other. Even the Minister's son went there. And this brings me to the matter of social standing in the Long Grey Town. First, there was the Earl in his castle; but he and his family were spoken of with bated breath. They were seen only on the rarest of occasions and spent most of their time in London or Cannes. To them our

town was almost non-existent. Then there was the Quality—landed gentry who rode to hounds and treated us with disdain. Next came the professional class, our doctors, bankers, lawyers, who held themselves aloof from the common tradesmen. The latter, with the office men, the shopkeepers and employers of labour, formed a large middle class to which we belonged. Below them were the skilled workers, and, last of all, the unskilled labourers.

Each of these sections looked down upon the one immediately below, while they accepted the patronage of the class above. It was quite in the order of things. We were told: "Keep your place and don't try to imitate your betters." But, besides this social demarcation, the town was notable for three types of citizens . . . First came the weavers, working in their low cottages, their handlooms visible through the small windows. They were pale and inclined to be intellectual. They were of Huguenot origin, responsible for the town's foundation, and its most worthy citizens. By contrast there were the farmers, ruddy and intelligent, but hardly well-read. They too were a fine type. . . . Lastly, about two miles out of town, were the coal pits and iron works, but the colliers and furnacemen were regarded as beyond the pale. When they came into town on Saturday night, to drink their pay, they seemed a race apart. The pitmen, especially, were pallid, stunted creatures, and to me in my childish days a source of fear and repulsion.

In school there were all classes, from Willie Lamb, the Minister's son, to Nellie Purdie, whose mother was in the almshouse. In summer all of us went barefoot, except Willie, whom we twitted on having to wear boots. He was a poor spindling, but he looked enviously at our bare feet. However, on the sharp gravel of the playground, he had the best of us. In winter, too, many of the pupils went barefoot, because their parents were too poor to buy them shoes. I have seen them coming to school when the ground was hard with frost, their feet cracked and purple with cold. But they were spartan about it and scorned our pity. Nay, they rather claimed our admiration. On winter days we would huddle outside the school door, crying:

"Teacher, teacher, let me in;  
My hands are cold, my shoes thin."

I can testify to the hands, for often I returned home with fingers frozen; and, oh, how bitterly I wept as they thawed out!

One incident of my school I recall vividly. Seated at the desk near me was the girl Nellie, whose mother was on the parish. She was a frail lass, with bare feet and ragged gown, but she had a mass of pale gold hair that I admired in spite of its untidiness. Then one day the teacher stooped over her and said in a tone of disgust:

"Nellie, you're a dirty girl. You have beasties in your hair."

Nellie hung her head and began to cry. I felt sorry for her, so I rose, holding up my hand.

"Please, Teacher, Auntie Jeannie caught ten in my head last night."

The teacher said: "No doubt you got them from Nellie."

"Oh, no," I said chivalrously, "I'm sure she got them from me."

Our teacher told me to hush and retired behind her desk to laugh chokingly. When I got home that night I told the family of the incident. Aunt Jeannie went as red as a beet, but the others laughed a lot. Then she got out the small-tooth comb and gave me a thorough going-over. I enjoyed seeing the little beasties drop on the paper and hearing them crack under my thumb-nail.

I do not remember much more about this school except that one day the Head Master stopped me on the playground. He was a bearded man, as all Heads were in those days.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"A philosopher," I said gravely.

He laughed heartily and told the story to the family, confirming their belief in my originality. Years after, Aunt Jeannie wrote to me: "You did not become a philosopher, but you became a poet, which is much better." I rather doubted it, but I was pleased that she was pleased.

Once I heard my grandfather remark: "Yon's a queer wee callant. He'd sooner play by himsel' than wi' the other lads." This was true. Rather than join the boys in the street I would amuse myself alone in the garden, inventing imagination games. I would be a hunter in the jungle of the raspberry canes; I would be an explorer in the dark forest of the shrubbery; I would squat by my lonely campfire on the prairie, a little grass plot where the family washing was spread. I was absorbed in my games, speaking to myself or addressing imaginary companions. No wonder the others thought me a queer one. I looked forward to bedtime; for then, about half an hour before dropping off to sleep, I had the most enchanting visions. Shining processions of knights and fair ladies passed before my eyes: warriors, slaves and pages emerged and faded. I did not seem to imagine them. They just presented themselves, a radiant pageantry. They gave me a rare delight, and I was loath to fall asleep. But all at once this gift of visioning left me, and, alas! it has never returned.

I used to sleep with Aunt Jeannie, who cuddled me a lot. Every Saturday night she would change her chemise and tell me not to look while she was doing it. But one night I dared to peep. What I saw made me duck my head under the blankets. "If women

undressed are as ugly as that," I pondered, "I never want to get married."

Aunt Jeannie was housekeeper; Aunt Bella liked to scrub and work in the open air; but Aunt Jeannie was accounted the literary one of the family, because she read books. The others only read papers. She encouraged me to learn poetry from the school primers. These selections were mostly from Campbell and Longfellow. So standing on a chair I would spout: "The boy stood on the burning deck," or "It was the schooner *Hesperus*." The more I ranted and gestured, the more they applauded. In those days I was not troubled by an inferiority complex, and to outsiders must have been an egregious little pest. I was undoubtedly precocious, but if they spoiled me it was not my fault. There was, in fact, quite a literary tradition in our family. My great-grandfather had been a crony of Robert Burns and claimed him as a second cousin. One of our parlour chairs had often been warmed by the rump of the Bard; for, besides being a rhymester, my ancestor had been a toper; so I expect if that chair could have talked it could have told of wild nights with John Barleycorn. To my folks anything that rhymed was poetry, and Robbie Burns was their idol.

Perhaps something of this atmosphere affected me; but poetry attracted me from the first—largely, I suppose, because of the rhyming. So one day I astonished the family by breaking into verse. It was the occasion of my sixth birthday and the supper table was spread like a feast. The centrepiece was a cold boiled ham, a poem in coral and ivory. Flanking it in seductive variety were cookies, scones and cakes. For a high tea it was a tribute even to a pampered brat like myself. As I looked at it in eager anticipation, an idea came into my head. Grandfather was sharpening the knife to cut the ham, when suddenly he remembered he had forgotten to say grace. It was then I broke in.

"Please, Grandpapa, can I say grace this time?"

All eyes turned to me, and I could see disapproval shaping in their faces. But I did not give them a chance to check me. Bowing my head reverently, I began:

"God bless the cakes and bless the jam;  
Bless the cheese and the cold boiled ham;  
Bless the scones Aunt Jeannie makes,  
And save us all from belly-aches. Amen."

I remember their staring silence and my apprehension. I expected to be punished, but I need not have feared. There was a burst of appreciation that to-day seems to me incredibly naïve. For years after they told the story of my grace till it ended by enraging me.

This was my first poetic flutter, and to my thinking it suggests tendencies in flights to come. First, it had to do with the table, and much of my work has been inspired by food and drink. Second, it was concrete in character, and I have always distrusted the abstract. Third, it had a tendency to be coarse, as witness the use of the word "belly" when I might just as well have said "stomach." But I have always favoured an Anglo-Saxon word to a Latin one, and in my earthiness I have followed my kinsman Burns. So, you see, even in that first bit of doggerel there were foreshadowed defects of my later verse.

## Chapter Three

### BAD COMPANY

“WHY can ye no’ play wi’ Wullie Lamb?” asked my aunt.

“He’s too clean,” said I. “Besides, he wears specks.”

“Ach, ye’re daft. I’m thinkin’ ye’ve a weakness for wasters. Yon Dougan boy, for example. Ye ken his father drinks like a fish. Oh, I’m no haudin’ that against him. The worst o’ it is, the man’s a *Papist*. Ye’ll no’ go tae heaven if ye frequent wi’ lads like that.”

“Don’t Papists go to heaven?”

“Weel, they maybe slink in by the back-door. But here I am tryin’ tae bring ye up wi’ religion in yer hert and ye havna’ read yer day’s chapter in the Bible.”

“But I want to play with my new gurr.”

This was an iron hoop one trundled with a “cleek.” I boasted I could run the length of the town with it, without stopping. Jimmie Dunn, the blacksmith, had made it for me for sixpence. But my aunt was inexorable. “If ye don’t read yer chapter, ye’ll go to the bad place an’ burn for ever.” I remembered how it hurt when I burned my finger-tip on the stove and shuddered at the thought of burning all over. *And* eternally. So obediently I took up my Bible, hoping the day’s chapter was a short one. Usually I gabbled the words, giving no heed to the meaning. This time I gabbled faster than ever, for it was one of the “begat” chapters; but in my heart I cursed the begetters.

Willie, the Minister’s son, was indeed my pet aversion, because he was always being held up as a model to me. His tidiness irked me, and I loved to flip ink on his white collar. Besides being a cry-baby, he was Teacher’s pet. He sheltered under the wing of Tammie McCurdie, son of the Elder. Tammie was a gangly boy destined for the Kirk, though he knew more bad words than any other lad in school. . . . Maybe there is something wrong with me, but all my life I have had a weakness for scallywags. I prefer the picturesque to the good. Better the blasphemy of Burns than the blessing of a bishop. And this trend showed itself in my tender years, for I fell into bad company with happy alacrity. This was in the person of Pat Dougan, son of the town chimney-sweep. He was a striking lad, some three years older than I. He had a broad, blunt

face, clinched by a tight mouth, and steel-grey eyes with a stormy stare. His sorrel hair matched his freckles, while in figure he was strong and shapely. Altogether he was wonderful in my eyes, and in his company I felt safe and serene.

True, when his father was spruced up, he was the best-looking man in town; just as in his working hours he was the most disreputable. "What does it matter if my face be gloured with soot when my soul is grimed with sin," he would say in his cups, which was nearly every night. In this he was encouraged by the publicans who gave him free drinks because of his entertainment value. Landlords vied for him, and when the word went round that he was in the Brig o' Ayr or the Bull and Bagpipes there the crowd would go. He would dominate the convivial gathering and receipts would be doubled. Besides, he was the town's man of mystery. He had gipsied to the ends of the earth, been a soldier, a sailor, and heaven knows what other disreputable character. Anyhow, to my mind he was the most colourful of men, and I regarded him with admiration.

He looked the reckless adventurer, tall and lean, with bold features and a bitter smile. His voice had a vibrancy that made his every word sound dramatic, and he had lost the first two fingers of his right hand, so that we called him Three-Fingered Frank. Although repulsive in his official capacity, when tidied up women looked at him willingly. No doubt he could have had many of them, but he was true to the memory of his wife. It was said by his friends that the loss of her had driven him to drink, while his enemies declared his drinking had hastened her end.

There was always one dramatic moment in the evening, when the boys in the bar-room would shout for Frank to tell the story of his lost fingers. Holding up his maimed hand, he would begin a ten-minute recital. His story varied and sometimes would be so different it seemed his imagination was greater than his veracity. But he was always exciting, and his yarn never failed to bring down the house. . . . However, there was a side of him that his son knew, and, to a small degree, myself. Before he went on his nightly binge, while Pat was washing up the supper dishes, he would get out a shabby Shakespeare and spout immortal lines. We thought he did it beautifully, and I felt little thrills go up my spine. He awoke in me a joy in Shakespeare I have never outgrown. For a desert island choice between the Bible and the Bard I would elect the latter. Indeed, after my first forced reading of the Bible, I do not remember opening it again. Yes, Pat's father was a queer card. I think he must have spouted Shakespeare for the boys in the back room, for one day I heard Jimmie Dunn, the blacksmith, remark:

"It's a sair pity to see a man that can out-rant a' the actors, soopin' lums for a livin'."

Jimmie's smiddy was my favourite haunt. It was near our house, and I would squat on a heap of hoof-pairings, watching the smith bang out horseshoes. I loved the smell of burning bone, the shower of sparks and the hiss of water on hot iron. Jimmie usually ignored me, but one day he said: "Whit are ye goin' to be when ye get tae be a big man?"

"A blacksmith," I said.

"Whit fur d'ye want tae be a blacksmith?" he asked.

"I want to have strong arms like you," I told him.

This was true. I never tired of admiring them. They were so massive, though he himself was slight. It seemed as if all the might of him had gone into his arms. I could see he was flattered, so I said, "I know a poem about a blacksmith." Then I began: "Under a spreading chestnut tree," and went on to the end. When I had finished he said: "Weel, I've no' got a tree and I've no' got a dochter to sing in the choir, but I like yer piece. Who wrote it?"

I told him. At that age Longfellow was tops with me as a poet, except, of course, Burns. Often he asked me to recite the poem. But I never made any effort to follow his trade. I might have had more respect for myself if I had learned to do at least one thing well.

Pat was the most perfect pal I ever had, dearer to me than any brother. Later on I accepted friendship with reserve, but with Pat my confidence was absolute. He was wise in the lore of field and forest and helped me to understand Nature. We went berrying and mushroom-picking, bird-nesting in the hedges, or guddling trout in the burn. It was while returning from one of these outings we encountered Tammie McCurdie and Willie Lamb. The path was narrow; it was a question who should give way, but Pat brushed Tammie aside. Then he strode arrogantly on, while I followed meekly. We had not gone more than a few yards when Tammie recovered. "Who are ye shovin', ye bluidy Papist?" he shouted indignantly. Pat turned. I knew that fearless stare in his steel-grey eyes. "Say that again," he challenged.

"Bluidy Papist!" said Tammie sullenly. Then Pat pulled off his coat. Tammie reluctantly followed suit, and I saw my first fight. It was short but bloody. There must have been an enmity between them, for they battled like tigers. But while Tammie swung his arms with flailing blows, Pat delivered his punches with cunning. He concentrated on Tammie's nose. After the second tap blood flowed freely. Soon his face was a mask of gore, and obviously it frightened him. Then Pat bored in and flattened him on his back.



"Noo, say ye're a bluidy Papist," he demanded. As Tammie hesitated, he gave him a savage clout. "Come on, ye stinkin' Protestant, say it." Still no reply. Another clout; then Tammie's blood-stifled voice: "I'm a bluidy Papist."

"Louder. Say it three times." Tammie did so. Then Pat said: "Noo, gang hame an' tell yer faither whit I made ye say."

But before he could rise I felt I had to have my innings. There was Willie Lamb, goggle-eyed with terror. I adopted the same position as Pat and advanced on him. Putting my left foot behind him, I pushed him over on his back.

"Noo, say ye're a bluidy Papist," said I. Willie lost no time. Eagerly he proclaimed himself one and repeated the stark avowal. However, I wanted to go one better than Pat, so I said: "Say ye're a rotten, stinkin' Papist pig." But Pat checked me. "Leave the — be," he said contemptuously. "And you, ye wee bantam, ye don't know how to fetcht. Come on an' I'll gie ye a lesson." The result was that I too went home with a bloody nose, but proud in my newly discovered character of a budding Tom Sayers.

I was always a show-off, and as Pat was a hero in my eyes I would do anything to win his praise. So it happened that one day we were returning from a ramble when we came to a field where a black bull grazed in solitary state. He had a fearsome reputation and we were both in awe of him. However, from the safe side of the hedge we hooted at his majesty, who took no notice. Then suddenly Pat said: "I'll daur ye tae rin across the field." At the very thought a creepy sensation ran down my spine. Vividly I saw myself gored and trampled. A dare was hard to take; yet to challenge the wrath of that black monster was unthinkable. . . . Then to my amazement I saw myself doing that very thing. Like a flash I found myself on the bull side of the hedge.

"Come back, ye wee deevil," I could hear Pat cry, but already I was crawling round the end of the field. My idea was to skirt the hedge, moving stealthily. However, as the bull took no notice, I grew bolder. "Maybe the old fellow is a bluffer like myself," I thought. So I ventured into the open. Airily I waved my hand to Pat, feeling a bit of a toreador. This, however, attracted the attention of the bull. "Who is this mannikin invading my domain?" he seemed to say. "I must investigate." So he advanced and I can imagine his indignation. Did this diminutive specimen of humanity take him for a cow? Well, he would prove his virility. . . .

As I saw him coming, my nerve failed. I ran for the nearest hedge; but this made the bull run too, and tossing his head he came after me at a trot. I sprinted and would have reached safety when I tripped and fell. The brute had me at his mercy. Panic-stricken,

I saw him bearing down on me, his black bulk towering to high heaven. I lay there, paralyzed with fear, awaiting the doom I had invited. Then I heard a wild shout and saw the bull pause. It was Pat to the rescue. The bull turned to face this fresh outrage, with Pat only a few yards away making abusive gestures. The bull bellowed and charged. Pat ran for the hedge. He reached it, with the bull at his heels, and cleared it by a running dive. In a heap he landed on the other side, while I, too, crawled to safety. When I rejoined him I found him shaken.

"I want to puke," he said feebly. But after a bit the sick feeling went away, and while the bull roared and foamed we thumbed our noses at him and called him nasty names.

"Whit did ye do it for?" said Pat.

"I jist wanted to show you I wisna' feared," I answered. He gave me a curious look. This was my first experience of that mysterious force that made me do foolish things against which my reason revolted. A power stronger than myself seemed to push me into situations false to my nature. When I was young I never had the courage to be a coward. But if one is imaginative, nervous, and has little self-confidence it is not easy to be brave. I was like that. Most of my exhibitions of spunk were pure bluff, but no one ever found me out.

I had only one quarrel with Pat, and that was serious enough. For three months we passed each other as though we were invisible. One evening we were returning from eel-catching in the burn and were on the little path where we had had our famous fight. I was going ahead when I paused.

"There's a man lyin' doon. I'm thinkin' he's deid."

"Deid drunk, nae doot," said Pat. Then he went white and pushed me back. The man was sprawled across the path, one side of his face in the dirt, spume on his lips. I thought he had had a fit, till I got a whiff of whisky. Then I saw it was Frank Dougan. He was in his working clothes, grimy and tattered. I had never seen a more brutish sight. Pat bent over him anxiously; then he turned to me. "Get oot o' this." He made an effort to raise his father, but failed.

"Can't I help you?" I faltered. The idea of going through the village supporting a drunken man dismayed me, but I was game.

"Get oot, daum ye!" Pat cried. And as I hesitated he struck me.

"All right, I'll no' forget that," I said. From a distance I saw him bending over his father. Then he fetched some water in his cap from the mill-dam and splashed it in the man's face. But soon a labourer came along, and between them they got Frank to his cottage.

Next time I saw Pat he glowered at me and I turned bitterly away. He would have to make it up, not I. So it went on all autumn. I missed him miserably, but I was too proud to take the first step. Then one afternoon I met him on the street. This foolishness, I decided, has gone on long enough. I had just bought a poke of toffee balls, "cheuch Jeans" we called them, and they filled the mouth uncomfortably. I went up to him, thrusting out my poke.

"Hae yin," I said. "They're no sae bad." To my relief he took one and I did the same. For a while the sucking of them precluded conversation. Then he finally conceded: "Naw, they're no' sae bad." An awkward pause; then: "D'ye want to see my new peerie?" This was a spinning-top painted red. I wound the string round it and threw it to the ground, at the same time drawing the cord brusquely away. My timing was good, the top hummed sweetly.

"She's a champion," I said.

"No sae bad, but look how I can dae it." He wound the string round it, held it in a certain way, then flung it into the air. In another second it was spinning merrily on the palm of his hand. I was full of admiration. He was the only boy I ever saw do that, and though I practised for hours I could never get the trick of it. Pat was like that. Not only could he do things better than other boys, but he could do things other boys could not. At our school he would have been a leader, for he had manliness and sense of responsibility. But he was a Catholic and took lessons from the priest. Instead of being the most popular lad in town, he was an outlaw. For the Scotch looked down on the Irish, thinking them feckless. On the other hand, I loved them, and though I have all the dour qualities of my race, there is something of the Irishman in my heart.

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## Chapter Four

### LAND OF MAKE-BELIEVE

MY memories of the Long Grey Town are sunshine memories. No doubt there were dark days, but they left no impression. One remembers the good and forgets the evil. And my last summer there was notably radiant. I discovered a woodland glade, with a stretch of greensward and a spring bubbling up from a bed of water-cress. The Fairy Dell and the Magic Spring I christened them, and they became our favourite haunt. For Pat's benefit I spun a fantastic yarn about them. Fairies danced beneath the midnight moon and gnomes trooped under the trees, while the Magic Spring had gifts of healing for mind and body. But I had not bargained for Pat's Irish credulity. He swallowed all the stuff I made up and begged for more. I had been reading Grimm and Andersen, and it was easy to invent on similar lines. What was to me a game, he took seriously, so I tried to make my stories as credible as possible. It was flattering to find an older lad listening to me with such rapt attention, and judging from the quantities of the water he drank I suspect he believed in the virtues of the Magic Spring.

This was my discovery of my story-telling gift. It came so easily to me I was amazed other boys listened avidly. I never believed in fairy tales, but I could make others do so. While I talked with my tongue in my cheek, they hearkened goggle-eyed. Silly stuff, but if they liked it, it was all right with me. . . . But if I thought little of my gift of making up stories, I was rather perky about my reciting. Now in the Third Reader I enlarged my repertoire from its selections: *On Linden when the sun was low . . . The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold . . . Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note . . . Where dark as winter was the flow of Iser rolling rapidly . . .* Oh, how I loved the hackneyed lines and mouthed them mightily!

But always I returned to Burns. Apart from his being in a way a family connection, I felt a spiritual kinship with him. Sprawling on a grassy mound, I would try to convince Pat that Burns was greater than Shakespeare. He liked the Anglicized verse, while I preferred the Doric. It was the tongue of our town and every word was vital. But I savoured him at his saltiest, and read with gusto about *The Lass that made the bed for me*, and the *Louse in the lady's bonnet*. I

preferred humour to sentiment and liked it racy. Already I felt an urge to shock people. This with my contempt for fairies are traits in my character that revealed themselves early . . .

One day, after I had spun an unusually convincing yarn, he surprised me by saying: "Ye ken, ye've got something I havna' got." I answered, thinking of his courage and his practical cleverness: "I'd give you all I've got for what you've got." And I meant it too. I admired him so, I would gladly have changed places with him. But one day he turned the tables on me and I ceased to be the dominant one.

He had returned from a visit to the city, where his father had taken him to the theatre to see Barry Sullivan, the red-haired Irish Hamlet. The play was *King Richard Third*, and Pat paced the sward ranting: "A horse, a horse, me kingdom for a horse." I thought it grand and was not surprised when he told me it was his intention to become an actor. He was ablaze with enthusiasm, particularly as one of our village boys had gone to America and won to fame as a Shakespearian player. Aunt Jeannie told me that my father had had a fight with this boy over a girl. His name was Robert Mantell.

Pat brought some paper-backed copies of the tragedies to the dell, and there we strutted and spouted. He made me take the female rôles, which did not over-please me; yet, while I did not understand much of what I read, I liked the sound of it. I rather think Pat had more enthusiasm than talent. However, he had listened to his father for so long he knew how to deliver blank verse. It must have been a quaint sight to see us two kids shouting and sawing the air in the green glade by the babbling spring.

Then one day my parents retrieved me, and I was spirited away to the city. I had no time to tell Pat, but I pictured him pacing the Dell, awaiting me to play Lady Macbeth to his Thane of Cawdor. I imagine he missed me miserably, just as I did him. For despite our differences we clicked marvellously. He was more sentimental than I and listened emotionally to those stories I told with my tongue in my cheek. I found I could play on his feelings, even hold him spellbound. This power excited me, inspiring me to more daring inventions. It was so easy. One idea led to another till the trouble was to curb myself. Yet, though it gave me a sense of superiority, I had nothing to be elated about. He had all the qualities that make for success. He was constructive, responsible, born to lead. I had none of these. Dreamer and fumbler, I was of the stuff of which failures are made.

I do not want to leap ahead in this history, but it seems fit I should

tell of my next meeting with Pat. It was thirteen years later, when I had almost forgotten him.

It has often worried me, my faculty for forgetting people. I get so absorbed in the present, the past becomes vague and unreal. I do not mean to be ungrateful, but when I am separated from my friends a curtain drops between us, gradually blotting them out. So the memory of Pat faded, and the brightest chapter of my childhood became like a dream. The innocent boy that was I died in the Fairy Dell, and maybe his ghost haunts it to this day. Perhaps two boys died there and two ghosts stride the greensward, and the willows remember them, and the Spring babbles of their limpid joy . . .

Well, it happened that I paid a farewell visit to my aunts before sailing on the Great Adventure. In the evening I took a walk to the Iron Works, for I loved to see the blast furnaces opened and the molten metal run out. I was returning by a row of sordid little houses when a voice hailed me. I stared at a tall young fellow, lounging in soiled clothes in a narrow doorway.

"Don't you know me? I'm Pat Dougan." I had a sense of shock, but I was pleased to see him again.

"Well, well," I said, "this is a surprise. After all these years. . . . We're no longer kids."

"No, I'm married. Have a kid of my own. Another on the way."

I felt sorry for him. He was only twenty-three. Oh, how glad I was to be free! He must have sensed my feeling, for he went on bitterly: "Yes, I'm in a trap, done for. Not that I should complain. The wife's a good lass, and I suppose I'm lucky; but God! how I wish I'd run off to be a sodjer." There seemed to be nothing I could say, so I silently took stock of him. He was well knit and nicely proportioned. I imagined he was solid muscle yet quick withal. "You look fine," I said.

"Oh, yes, I'm fighting fit. I'm a bricklayer's helper. Carrying a hod up a ladder develops every muscle you've got. But to think of the days when Father used to read Shakespeare and I wanted to be an actor! And here I am a hodman, with no chance to be better."

"Don't say that. A fellow has to make his chance. I'm going to risk mine in America."

"Wish I could go along with you."

"Well, when I get there I'll see if there's a good field for you."

His eyes lit up with hope and he gripped my hand. "That's a go. Maybe we'll string along yet. Oh, I'll never forget the old days. You know, I sometimes go back to the Spring and think of the times we had. Remember you wanted to write?"

"Maybe I'll try my hand at it yet."

"Good luck to you. But I'll never be an actor. *Shadows we are*

*and shadows we pursue . . .* Remember how Father used to roll out those lines?"

"Indeed I do. . . . Is he well?"

"Dead. Some years ago. Lost his voice coughing soot. It broke his heart he could no longer spout Shakespeare. . . . Well, come on ben; the wife will make you a cup o' tea."

The single room was bare of ornament, yet a good fire blazed, for coal was cheap. A bairn cried in a cot and a little woman rose from soothing it. She would have been slight, but she was heavy with another. She was pretty in a frail way, with a bunch of bright hair. She looked at me curiously as she poured tea, though she said nothing. However, Pat gave her little chance. He talked as if my coming had roused him from despair. I could see hope kindling in his eyes. His wife looked at him with pathetic anxiety. She made a sympathetic appeal to me, and I felt sure he would never do anything to hurt her.

"Remember to write," he said. "You're going to a grand country where a man's got a chance to find his own level. It's a Godsend you dropped by. Somehow I feel the luck's going to turn. Well, I'll do my damndest to make it. So long, old boy. . . ."

As I walked home I felt depressed. Here was I, free, with all the promise of the future, and he going back to his sordid home and his hod. And I thought of his father. . . . "Wasted lives!" I sighed. "Oh, there are so many like that. They never get a chance." Then I thought of his little wife, and a light flashed in my mind. No wonder she looked at me in that peculiar way. I recognized her now. It was Nellie Purdie, the girl I had championed in the schoolroom.

## Chapter Five

### INNOCENCE, GOOD-BYE

THE first day I went to school I came home crying.

"Whit's the matter?" asked Aunt Jeannie.

"I don't want to go to school."

"Whit fur don't ye no want to go to school?"

"The boys won't leave ma kilts alane. They pull them up."

That was true. I had gone to class so proud in my Highland costume. "Yer wee kilts are sae bonnie," said Aunt Jeannie. But the other boys had jeered, and then one of them had lifted me up and spanked me. Before the girls too. Oh, how I was shamed! No, I wouldn't wear them again to school, and Grandfather sustained me. "Gie wee Rubbert Wullie his troosers," he ordained.

But kilts were my first costume and they are associated with my earliest memory. It is interesting to discover one's first recollection. Mine is of *going to jail*. It was the year before I went to live in the Long Grey Town with my aunties, and I was then in the city with my parents. I was wearing my kilt for the first time. Perhaps that was what impressed the occasion on my memory. I was walking with my nurse. She lugged me along with one hand while with the other she pushed the pram with my baby brother. I hung back, wanting to look at the shops. A candy shop particularly excited me, but my nurse dragged me on. Then Romance entered her young life and she released my hand to surrender hers to a budding butcher. This was my chance. Always the Escapist I slipped away.

The sweetie shop was round the corner, and there I gave myself up to the joy of window-shopping. For half an hour I stood with my nose flattened against the pane; then I suddenly remembered my nurse. No sign of her. I was lost. It rather elated me. Forlornly I stood at the curb and a crowd collected. "Oh, the puir wee laddie! He's wandert," I heard them say, and I enjoyed their commiseration. The crowd increased. Suddenly a stalwart policeman parted the people and loomed over me. He had a long black beard, but I looked up at him without awe.

"Where d'ye live?" he asked.

"Half-past four," I answered. No doubt this was because nurse had been told to get home by half-past four, and that was all I



could remember. But again he asked me, and again I answered: "Half-past four." I still recall how the crowd laughed, while I wondered why they should.

Then the officer took me by the hand and conducted me to the police station. It is difficult for a bobby to maintain his dignity holding a tiny tot by the hand. He must have felt this, for he walked in a stately way and loftily ignored me, while the people we passed gave me glances of pity. But I trotted along cheerfully, enjoying it all. The station waiting-room consisted of bare walls and benches garnished with squalid-looking people. They gave me the same commiseration. The "wee callant wi' his braw kilts" held the centre of the scene. Then a blousy matron arrived and clasped me to her capacious bosom. I resisted—till she brought me tea and buns and tempted me to sit on her knee. I was enjoying myself when Mama blew in. She was frantic and ran to grab me; but I was having a gorgeous feed and, with my mouth full of bun, I refused to leave the matron. Kicking and howling I was dragged from the police station; and (though I have no doubt I richly deserved it), I take this occasion to state I have never been in one since.

One morning Aunt Jeannie said to me: "Ye're wearin' yer kilts the day."

"But I'm going to school," I objected.

"No, ye're no'. Yer father and mother are comin' to visit ye." This filled me with dismay. It had been a long time since I had seen them, and I had almost forgotten their existence. From time to time I heard of the birth of new brothers but did not feel interested. So I donned my kilt, now too short for me. When my parents arrived I was so shy I hid in the wash-house and had to be routed out. I hung back as I was introduced to the authors of my being, and it was only by offering me sweets my mother coaxed me on her knee. When she did, I remember a look of horror coming over her face. However she said nothing—just then.

Apart from my diffidence, the visit was not a success. Aunt Jeannie objected to tobacco, and Papa was obliged to go outside to smoke. While he puffed his pipe moodily by the pump, Mama was having an argument with Aunt Jeannie by the hen-house.

"My word!" said Mama. "I consider it shocking. To think that that poor boy has *nothing on* under his kilts—nothing. He's absolutely bare."

"That's whit makes Hielandmen hardy," said Aunt Jeannie. Mama was unconvinced. Then Aunt Jeannie stressed the handiness of the garment when it came to performing certain natural functions, and this Mama was obliged to admit though it evidently shocked her. "Well, I don't approve of it," she said, "and I'm real vexed." I

think it was this matter of the kilt that made her finally retrieve me, although my aunts wanted to adopt me. However, Mama was anti-adoptionist to the core. If she had had a hundred children, instead of a mere ten, I do not think she would have parted with one.

I respectfully submit that whoever made up the Ten Commandments might have done a better job. Take the fourth. One is exhorted to honour one's parents, with a bribe of longevity. Honour to whom honour is due, say I. I have known very few men worthy of it, and I could never see why parents should be honoured just because they are responsible for our existence. I know it is considered bad taste to criticize them, and I do not want to be lacking in respect; but I have always felt that it should be the other way about—that it is the parents who should honour the children; for if the race is really advancing, the new stock should be better than the old. . . . I must confess that on his visit to me Papa failed to make a favourable impression. He had the reddest face I ever saw. His head was balding than that of Mister Lamb, but his mutton-chop whiskers were longer. In fact they looked like discouraged Dundrearies. But what most impressed me was his stomach, which ballooned a fancy waistcoat girt by a heavy gold chain. Although he carried his bay-window with dignity, I disliked it.

Of the many good things Papa did for me, not the least was to serve as a physical warning. My hair has faltered but never failed, while my girth has not got out of bounds. Of course we are not permitted to pick our parents; but I think every father should so conduct himself that his children would never want any other, even if they had the choice. Family and ancestry have never interested me. I hope I am descended from yeoman farmers with ruddy faces and bright eyes. If I am descended from pale weavers, I am not ashamed, for they are a worthy folk and their brains are alive. But if I am of collier stock, I will say nothing. Yet I have a dark suspicion, for I remember an old lady, a sister of my grandmother. She had a face as delicate as a cameo, and she was handsome in an aristocratic way. But she wore a mutch, and she used to sit by the fire with a cutty pipe in her mouth, smoking strong tobacco that *savoured of the pit*.

Of all my family Grandfather most commanded my respect. He was a pawky Scotsman of the non-committal type. If you said it was a fine day, he would look thoughtfully at the sky and finally admit: "Weel, I've see waur." If you suggested it was raining, he would answer cautiously: "I'll no be denyin' it's a wee bit saft." But he was fond of a sly joke and had a fund of vestry-room stories, such as the one about the "height of hospitality" and that other about

the lassie who indignantly told her musical but over-ardent sweet-heart: "Never will I associate wi' a man that whistles on the Sabbath."

He had two enthusiasms, the Scotch Kirk and Scotch whisky. Every morning he would stir into his porridge, which he took in a wooden bowl, a big wooden spoonful of Mountain Dew. But he also boasted that though he liked his wee dram he had never been the worse of liquor. He was canny in his cups. And what a pleasure he got out of eating! Every Saturday night he would bring us a dozen twopenny mutton-pies and I would be given a whole one. How delicious they seemed, fresh from the baker's oven. And the black puddings Aunt Jeannie made with blood from the butcher's—how crisp and crackly! Our high tea was a prideful occasion, with cookies, buns, scones, bannocks and oatcake, all made by Aunt Jeannie. Grandfather was praiseful of everything he ate, believing that when people cooked for you you should always be grateful and never criticize.

However, Aunt Jeannie's cooking was above criticism, particularly her cakes. Not that sometimes she didn't have a dud, but I liked duds best. Oh, how I loved the sad, heavy streak in the centre! And her short-bread! Scotch short-bread was glorified by her magic. Many a sore belly have I had from it; but bless it! let me have another.

Cold boiled ham was Grandfather's delectation, and the sight of it always makes me think of his death. We had a whole one for supper in honour of a lady visitor. Grandfather carved it with virtuosity and kept us in a simmer of merriment with his humorous remarks. Finally, the lady had to catch a train, and as she said her good-byes she complimented Grandfather on the deliciousness of his ham. Immediately he carved a huge slice. "Here, lassie, tak' this awa' wi' ye."

"But how would I carry it?"

His answer was prompt. "Put it inside yer bunnit." We all laughed at his sally, and he reached for his glass of water. I saw the glass tilt in his hand and the water spill down his beard. I thought it was because he was laughing so; then I saw the glass fall to the floor. Still laughing, he looked at his hand wonderingly. A look of childish surprise came over his face. There was no pain, no fear, just helpless bewilderment. Then he slumped over and was dead. So he enjoyed life to the last, and passed like a flash with a laugh in his eyes and a joke on his lips.

When I left the Long Grey Town I did not return for many years. But before I crossed the seas I went to say good-bye to my aunties. They were getting on in age but bearing up bravely. Though we merely shook hands on parting, they saw me go with some sad-

ness. I did not share this, for life was behind them and for me it was mostly to come. I wanted to get away as quickly as possible. Aunt Jeannie came to the station and embarrassed me by having tears in her eyes. I hated any sentimental fuss, so she pretended to smile, all the time thinking she would never see me again. But I wanted the train to hurry. All I thought of was of the adventure awaiting me. With the selfishness of youth I forgot her care and tenderness. As the train pulled out she kept waving her handkerchief. I could see her eyes shining, and I knew that when I was gone she would go behind the station and jab her hanky into them.

I promised to write often, but I rarely did so. I was fighting the battle of life, and they lived in a vague past that no longer meant anything to me. But from time to time I got news of them. They had retired to a tiny cottage, living pinched and meagre days. I did not realize it or I would have sent them the odd hundred pounds. I would never have missed it. It would have meant all the difference between scrimping and luxury to them. Instead of a loaf they might have bought a cake. Well, I just didn't think of it, and I am everlastingly sorry.

Of my good deeds I never yet  
Have grudged a single one;  
But O how deeply I regret  
Good deeds I *might* have done!

Forty years later I visited the Long Grey Town. It was changed out of recognition. There was a modern Post Office, and when I asked where the old one was they could not tell me. I found it at last, a pinched little grey house. But it was as neat as in Aunt Jeannie's time. There was the front door, freshly varnished, with its iron knocker. She was proud of her door and kept the flag-stone gay with whiting. Even the cobbles were scoured. . . . There was the thick mossy wall with the sunken door that led down to the garden. This was the one I always used, and through the hole in the top hung a cord to lift the inside latch.

I got the owner to let me take a peep at the garden. That, at least, had little changed. I saw the same flower-beds and remembered how I was sent to school with a sprig of sweet-william in my coat. The smell of the black currants made me think of poor Aunt Aggie, and as I looked at the raspberry canes I seemed to see a wistful little ghost peering out at me. Such an innocent boy, dreaming of fairies and knights in armour, and loving to be by himself so that he could live his dreams. . . . Yes, there were ghosts all around me, but chiefly of Aunt Jeannie and Grandfather. I cursed myself for being sentimental. Nevertheless I said: "God bless them."

Then I went to the church and sat in our old pew. Little was changed, except that there was a stained-glass window instead of

the clear one through which I used to see the swallows. And there were cushions on the seats. But there in front of me was the knot in the wood I had tried to punch out, with the marks of my knife still in the varnish. I felt like a little boy again. It was hard to realize that over half a century had gone and that for me life was nearly over. Most of the congregation had passed on, and soon I too would be eating my salad from the roots. As I left the church I was sunk in melancholy.

I searched for the graves of the family. The grass grew long and rank. Bedded in it were mouldy slabs of stone and moss-grown tombs half weathered away. Oh, it was old, old—confusion, neglect, rottenness! It smelt of the charnel house, and over it hung the ruined wall of the ancient Abbey. I sought out the sexton, a grey-haired man and bent.

“Yes, yer aunties used to sell me stamps in the Post Office. There’s no’ many like them nowadays. But there’s no’ many left to mind o’ them. My! when yer deid it’s a caution hoo quick ye’re forgotten.”

Yes, it was a shock to me. In this town they had been born, lived and died. They had been a part of it and had helped in its growing. Everyone knew them and they knew everyone. Yet now almost no one knew of them. Few had ever heard of them. Even their names were forgotten. We searched for the family grave, but he explained that a recent storm had blown down many of the tombstones. Finally he gave a grunt of discovery, and lifted a flat, mean slab covered with green slime, on which I could decipher the name of my grandfather alone. I minded when it was clean white marble—a thin, cheap stone, but the best we could afford.

So there they were, these old folks, so fine, so worthy, lying in a nameless grave. I felt shamed beyond belief. I went to the chief stonemason of the place, and ordered a tall monument of granite, bearing all their names; and in due time it was erected. I have never seen it; but perhaps sometime I will go back and pay my last respects to those humble people who were of my blood. Of my three aunts I think sadly. They should have married and had many children. They were made for that. But destiny meted out to them obscure and frustrate lives. Sterile and unfulfilled, they passed. Unwanted women— Ah! there are so many of them. Yes, I will go back and beg them to pardon me for my neglect. I might so easily have made their life less hard. A few luxuries, ribands for their caps, silken petticoats; instead of bannocks, cakes. And standing in the shadow of their tomb I will think sadly:

*They asked me for short-bread and I gave them—a stone.*

BOOK TWO  
*BOYHOOD*



## Chapter One

### DRAB SCHOOL

WHEN I was first recalled to the family fold I must have been a most objectionable brat. My aunts had spoiled me to the point of exhibitionism. True, I could draw and recite, and I was unusually "quick in the up-tak'"; but there was no reason to regard me as a boy-wonder. Because I was different, they thought me original; because I was precocious, they fancied me a prodigy. If I had remained with them I would have turned out a prize prig. But my new education was bang in the other direction. It was an inferiority complex course, from which I never recovered. It moulded me into the meek middle class to which I belonged.

How often did I hear phrases such as: "Children should be seen and not heard." . . . "Keep your place and don't try to ape your betters." . . . "You're getting too big for your boots; you want taking down a peg or two." It was ever being impressed on me that I must accept my station in life and not aspire to rise above it. But, it was the life itself which wore me down to submissive humility.

First of all, I had to get acquainted with a swarm of brothers. I forget how many there were, but it was rather bewildering. At first they looked on me as a stranger and were inclined to resent me, especially as I tried to patronize them. But soon I fell in line, though I never quite recovered from the feeling that I was a *changeling*.

"Dinna forget tae say yer prayers," was Aunt Jeannie's last injunction. That night in a large bare room shared by four of us, I knelt down by my bed and began my "Gentle Jesus." I heard sniggers, and a pillow was thrown at me. Mama intervened, telling my brothers that they would be better following my example. Having never been taught to do so, they found this funny. Their derision became indifference as I persisted in my prayers. Maybe I got a self-righteous kick out of it.

One night, when I shivered in the freezing cold, the idea came to me to say them in bed. Maybe God wouldn't mind, I thought, as I closed my eyes, clasped my hands, and drew up my legs as if I were kneeling. Thus comfortable, I prayed longer than usual, elaborating my usual petition to include friends far and near. Indeed, as I went on, these cosy bed-prayers became so comprehensive I often



fell asleep before they were finished. Then one night I went to sleep before they were begun. I had fallen into the habit of making up stories in my mind and became so interested that I ended by drowsing off before I got round to my prayers. Very remorseful, I tried to make up for it by a morning prayer and resolved it would not happen again. But it did, more and more often, till finally I lost the prayer habit. It died hard, though. For years I would pray intermittently, especially when I was worried or afraid; and when I realized I could no longer continue, I had a sneaking feeling that I was letting God down.

My new home was certainly a contrast to my old. It was absolutely devoid of religious atmosphere. I never knew Mama and Papa go to church. They brought us up like pagans and I never heard mention of even the existence of a deity. No doubt there was a place for piety, but it was certainly not the home. In church on Sunday the Minister took care of that, and we as children were prodded on to fill the family pew. It cost a pound a year, so Papa had to get value for his money. . . . And nearly all families were like that. Sunday morning church squared us with God for the rest of the week. That was the difference between town and country. In the latter the religious spirit was integral in our living, while in town it contracted to a weekly ritual. Religion died hard in me, but when it passed it did so for good. It seems a pity that all my Bible reading should have been wasted. Yet I think Aunt Jeannie's teaching did me no harm. Ultimately my sceptical spirit was bound to prevail, but until I was well advanced in boyhood my respect for righteousness survived.

Our home was in a four-story block of flats called Roselea Terrace. Opposite it was a similar block called Ferndale Terrace. Their sole rustic suggestions were their names; for they were both grim and gloomy, and only in high summer did the sunshine gild our door-mat. But it was a highly respectable street, where we lived in genteel poverty. Our flat was number nineteen, the biggest and the last in the terrace. It was on the ground floor and had a basement where there was an occasional rat, lots of mice and swarms of cockroaches. The latter were big glossy fellows that came out at night, so that we hated to venture into the kitchen after dark. They crunched horribly under the descending carpet slipper, and when the gas was lit they scuttled in all directions. Often they got in the beds, and I always remember the screams of Mama when a big one dropped from her panties.

We paid forty pounds a year for the flat, but generally had to borrow money to meet the rent. As time went on we had to turn the drawing-room into a bedroom, owing to the family increase.

There was a downstairs sitting-room we called the nursery, where I sat till midnight reading yarns of adventure when the house lay asleep. Then I would stumble to bed and know nothing more till awakened in the morning by Papa pulling the clothes off me. That was his way of making me get up. . . . Roselea Terrace stopped at our house and gave on a vacant lot we called the Hollow. It was full of pot-holes and clothed with rank grass and nettles, but it was our beloved playground. Board fences surrounded it, the crevices full of earwigs. It was priceless to us, as otherwise we would have been obliged to play in the streets. Although only a squalid wasteland, to our notion it was precious country where green things grew and the air was fresh. I have no doubt that sunken field did much to help our growth.

There were a gang of about twenty boys in our street and we were very aggressive. On the hill beyond was Sunnybrae Gardens where the boys were of a superior breed. Their fathers were successful business men, and they went to private academies, not to plebeian board-schools like ourselves. We called them "gentry pups" and sought fights with them. But down in Byars Road, which lay below us, was another class of small tradesmen, and their sons we called "keelies." With them, too, we were always at war. We were the middle-middle class, most bellicose of all, because we were better fed than the "keelies," and less fastidious than the "gentry pups." In short, we were rather nasty little vulgarians.

Of course I had to go to a new school. It must have been of better quality than my last, for bare feet were forbidden. My suggestion that I should go without shoes shocked my family. Papa said: "No one wears bare feet in the city. It's against a civil ordinance." It seemed queer to me, who loved to feel my soles in contact with the soil, that my feet should be prisoned or the city would be disgraced.

At eight in the morning we were routed out of bed, and after a cat's-paw wash we had breakfast of porridge (either under-cooked or burned), a roll and a straw-flavoured egg. Gulping it down, we were bundled off to school. As a rule we were late and had to run, leaving the smallest blubbing in the rear. There was no protective spirit among us. The youngest had to look out for himself. Fortunately the roads were safe, cabs and drays forming most of the traffic. Accidents were rare. The streets of my youth were fresh, calm, and innocent.

The school was in a dubious region between slumland and respectability. It was dingy, grey and shabby, but we used to run most of the way to get there in time to play. When the whistle blew, the playground would be jammed with boys playing games. Every Friday,

being washing-day at home, we were allowed to take a lunch to school. This consisted of an egg sandwich, with bread and jam. It took us five minutes to bolt it, after which we had the rest of the hour for play. The Masters wore shabby tail-coats and swung straps as they paced the floor. At my first school canes had been the instruments of discipline, but here thongs of leather were the symbols of authority. One can imagine the young Master going to the leather merchant and carefully selecting the tool of his trade. "Let me have a nice supple one with tails that flick around the fingers." . . . Or "Maybe I'd better try one of those broad heavy fellows. Perhaps it would be more effective if I soaked it in brine. Let me swish it through the air to get the balance of it." What would a Master be without his faithful strap?

There was a technique in swinging it. A turn of the wrist, and it would lacerate the hand. But most of the Masters played fair. Only when they were exasperated did they resort to that vicious twist. On the other hand, a flat delivery would raise a blister. Two strokes were the average and the maximum was four. After four it was a long time before the hands regained their feeling, and one was lucky if they were not cut open. But no one thought of complaining. We would grin ruefully and tell our chums we had been given a good licking. We would be proud of our bruises and boast how we could take it. The unwritten law prescribed that one must never be a cry-baby or a sneak. We dare not tell our parents, for they would have replied: "Well, you must have deserved it. Spare the rod, spoil the child. Corporal punishment is a part of education."

Maybe they were right, for was not the theory backed by ages of convention? Flogging was supposed to toughen the race. But in my case it had a contrary effect. I resented my strappings, and there was one in particular that even to-day makes me grit my teeth with rage. The German Master said something that set the class laughing, and he picked me out as a scapegoat. I was sent down to the Head to be flogged. He was a bearded man in a frock-coat and he took from his desk a black strap. "The whole class was laughing, sir," I protested. He answered: "I cannot punish the whole class, so I will make an example of you." And he did. That was the only time I got six. But though my hands were numb he did not break my spirit. Towards the last I was feeling distinctly murderous. It was not so much what he did to me as the gusto with which he did it. I found myself eyeing a heavy ink-well on his desk and wondering what would happen if I hurled it at his head. It was red ink too. I believe another lash would have made me do it.

One does not forgive and forget punishment that is severe and unjust. Years after, when I heard he had been drowned while bathing, I laughed for joy. Yet I have no doubt he gave no further thought

to the matter and would have been profoundly surprised at my lasting resentment.

In the lane behind the playground we frequently staged fights. I would say to another boy, "I can lick you," and he would reply: "I don't think you can."

"Well, meet me in the lane after school." So all the class would know and assemble to cheer or jeer.

Sometimes the school janitor, an old soldier, would intervene. "Fighting's a blackguardly thing," he said to me, as he marched my opponent and myself to the class Master. "You fought in the army," I protested. But he would not argue the matter. I disagreed with him. It is good for boys to fight, I thought. But the Master had to disapprove, so he gave us both a light one. Then he looked at me quizzically. "Who won?"

"He did," I said, pointing to my companion. But the latter, not to be outdone in generosity, insisted I was the victor. So the Master said: "Well, I suppose it was a draw; but don't make any return match, or I'll really warm your palms for you. Now shake hands."

On account of the boxing lessons Pat had given me I acquired the reputation of a scrapper. Luckily no one knew how little I knew, and the bluff worked. I do not think I was yellow, but as I never got a real licking I cannot be sure. And before I could find out, I was beyond the blubber age. For there comes a point in a boy's life when he discovers he no longer cries when he is hurt. When I was ten I crushed my hand in a gate and the pain was agonizing. But it was forgotten in my amazement to find I did not howl any more. I was on my way to be a man.

Of my companions at this school I recall only one, and he was unforgettable. He sat next to me, a boy with a pale face and a big head. One day I noticed that he was making drawings, and he showed me one.

"It's the Fat Boy in *Pickwick*," he told me gleefully. "When he's not eating he sleeps."

I admired the drawing, which was copied from Phiz. He had a lively sense of humour, and, though he did not shine at his lessons any more than I did, he was more avid and precocious. In fact, I was rather awe-struck to find that he had been able to absorb a *real novel*, as my reading was confined to penny dreadfuls and papers like *Ching Ching's Own*. My friend high-browed me, and sought to wean me away from Jack Harkaway and Deadwood Dick, but without success. *Eric, or Little by Little* gave me a pain in the neck, while *Tom Brown's School Days* repelled me by its moral platitudes. He tried to interest me in the *Boys' Own Paper*, known as the B.O.P., and endorsed by the public schools. No doubt it was *pukka*, but I was

not. I liked stories by Manville Fenn and Talbot Baines Reed, but constructive articles such as *How to Rig a Model Yacht* or *How to Stuff Birds* left me cold. So my apostle of uplift failed in his effort.

I mention him because to-day he is known as Britain's Best Journalist. He is the London Editor of a famous daily paper and has published many books. Cabinet Ministers consult him, and mandarins of letters weigh his words. One of his brothers is a famous etcher who has been knighted; while another is skipper of a big Atlantic liner, and himself an author of note. I used to call him Jimmy, but now I call him James. He still high-brows me and I love it.

I left this school in a glow of triumph. We had been told to do an essay on COAL, and the subject pleased me. So I sat down and found myself writing with surprising ease. Ideas crowded on me, and words came to clothe them so willingly I wondered what had gotten into me. It was my first experience of Inspiration. I finished in a mood of exultation. I knew my work was good; indeed, I knew it was better than the combined class could do. When the essays were handed back to us the teacher did not return mine. Instead he said: "Here is one I want to read aloud."

He did so, while I hung my head in embarrassed shame. I blushed when he indicated that I was the author, and the other boys laughed derisively. To write well was to be considered a sissy. Afterwards he took me aside.

"Did no one help you?"

"No, sir."

"Not even your father?"

"He's not capable," I said, a little contemptuously.

"Well, it's a pity someone could not take you in hand. If you were well trained you might bud."

I did not know what he meant, and he left it at that. But I was leaving next day for another school, so after I had packed my books I went to him and said: "Good-bye and thank you, sir." He was surprised and shook hands with me, saying: "You're the only pupil who ever said good-bye to me." I went away rather wistfully, wondering if I had not done it to show off.

## Chapter Two

### DREAM SCHOOL

IT was a gallant struggle to bring up a family of ten on two hundred pounds a year, and Papa and Mama should be given all credit. Especially as they kept up a front of *bourgeois* respectability. Behind the scenes our standards were proletarian. We boys slept in the flannelette shirts we wore during the day and would have considered serviettes at table a form of swank. I was fifteen before I bought my first tooth-brush. But we were clean and healthy, for we had a bath with soap every Saturday night. I believe we all used the same hot water.

At home it was a struggle to make frayed ends meet, yet each day we trooped off to what was then the Finest School in Scotland. There we were lucky, for it was brand-new and only five minutes from our house. It was a show school. The city fathers were proud of its beauty. It was equipped for science, art and domestic economy. Visitors were shown round *ad nauseam*. It made the swanking private academies look cheap. The Masters had University degrees and were hand-picked, while the Head wore a stove-pipe hat. It was a dream school dumped down almost at our door.

Here I remained until my final expulsion. I had the same teacher for three years and came to have a liking for him. He was a bantam of a man, with bandy legs and a big red moustache like a viking. To me he was a hero because he had been a famous football right-winger, and had won his international cap. That far outweighed any scholarship in my eyes. For a while I worshipped him. Then one Saturday afternoon in a side street I saw him stagger out of a pub. Once he pitched and fell, picking himself up with difficulty. I shrank into a doorway. How thankful I was he had not turned my way! I was as hurt as if I had received a clout on the face. I never told a soul about it. Most boys would have blabbed, but nothing would have made me sneak on him. No longer was he a hero in my eyes.

I was inclined to dramatize my difference from other boys. One time the chap next to me was called up for speaking in class. The Master was going to punish him when I stepped forward.

"Please, Sir, I was speaking too. I deserve to be punished as well as him."

Said the Master: "You should say 'as well as he,' so I'll punish you for bad grammar." And he did too, quite enthusiastically. Thus I was snubbed for my quixotic priggishness.

My chief failing was a pertness that amounted to impertinence. One time I was punished for this, and I remember it because it was the last occasion I ever received the strap. I think I had been making sketches in class, and I did not question the justice of the chastisement. Unless one got a licking every few days one suffered from an obnoxious sense of virtue. It was up to us to qualify for another strapping, and to grin to the class on returning to our seats. In this case I may have felt that my quota of punishment was about due. However, the Master told me to wait until after school, which was a low-down trick, as it deprived me of the satisfaction of showing my classmates how pluckily I could take it. Always the exhibitionist, I was glad to hold the centre of the stage for a moment, even if it was a painful one.

Now our Master had a habit of saying: "You know, this hurts me more than it hurts you." We all thought this was rubbing it in, especially as he put on a sad expression as if he really meant it. That look of grief really enraged me; so after he had given me two with a gusto that made me squirm, he added his formula of regret. As I turned away I muttered something, and he called me back.

"It seems you have some criticism to make of my conduct. What did you say?"

"I said I wished it hurted me in the same way it hurts you."

"Ha! And no doubt you wish too that it hurted *me* in the same way it hurts you. You are a Realist. Well, in future I won't punish you physically. You can now go home and write for me a hundred times: I am a Realist."

So I went home and by lashing three pens together tried to reduce my task by a third. It probably took me more time than the actual job would have done, but I had the great glee of outwitting authority.

I was always thinking out ways to cheat the Powers That Be, and one of them was my patent palm-shield. I cut a sheet of transparent mica-like material to the shape of my hand and equipped it with an elastic band so that it lay flat on my palm. At a little distance it was invisible. The chaps were enthusiastic, so it was decided we must try it right away. We selected a Master who was short-sighted. We would have preferred him a little deaf, but one could not ask too much.

I had some difficulty provoking him into punishing me, for he was a mild man who taught mathematics; but at last I succeeded in rousing his wrath. He invited me to step on to the floor and

produced a broad strap. All the chaps were agog with anticipation. Boldly I held out my right hand with its celluloid sheath. I saw his eyes glisten with satisfaction as he flung back the strap and swung it down with all his force. CLACK! It was a sound like a pistol-shot. The air between my palm and its shield was so violently expelled the crack made me jump. It also made the Master jump. I plunged my hand into my pocket, and there I left my protective device. Then taking out my hand I wrung it as if in pain. The boys rocked with laughter. The Master was puzzled. He examined his strap, then my hand, then told me to go to my place. After which he turned on the grinning class, singled out six and gave each a proper one.

My invention was voted such a success some suggested I should patent it. Many wanted to borrow it, but I did not believe in over-doing a good thing. I was trying to figure out a way of eliminating noise, when the Bad Boy of the school insisted on demonstrating it. He was hard-boiled and consequently a hero in my eyes, so I gave it gladly. But alas! he was over-confident and was detected. Thus the only invention I ever mothered, my Pupil's Palm Protector, died still-born.

When I was close to thirteen we had a wonderful summer and I spent three glorious months by the sea. In that time I changed almost beyond recognition. I came back a head taller, with a cracked voice and the hint of a moustache. Physically I felt the equal of any Master in school, so that I went round with a chip on my shoulder. When a teacher growled: "You deserve a proper thrashing," I gave him a contemptuous stare as much as to say: "Try it."

Oh, I know I should have been ashamed of myself, taking advantage of my strength to bully my Masters. They could not have a brawl with me that would end in a fight. I put them in an awkward position and they knew it. A year ago they would have beaten me, now they left me alone. I am afraid I was not a very nice boy, but all my life I have resented authority. It is by a man's vices you know him best. My record is one of shame and unworthiness. But all my faults and follies are part of me; so in painting a self-portrait let truth prevail. In most of my classes I was lazy, unambitious, and a dreamer. If the subject did not interest me my mind wandered. I drudged through mathematics, was fair at French and good at German. Grammar and spelling bored me, and all my life they have never seemed to matter much. History kindled my imagination while geography brought me dreams of far lands. But in one class I was superlatively good—English Literature. Oh, how I adored it! There I shone a star and astonished even the Master by my knowledge.

The reason is that I had become a ravenous reader. I devoured



books with febrile intensity. Night after night I would sit in the nursery under the whining gas-light until long after midnight. I read any book that interested me, but chiefly fiction. My appetite seemed insatiable. To begin with I exhausted the boys' books; Ballantyne, Mayne Reid, Jules Verne and others. Then I went on to more adolescent fare. My first novel was *Ivanhoe*. However, it was the only one by Scott I could ever get through. The others I found boringly descriptive. Harrison Ainsworth was more to my taste, and I read nearly everything he wrote. My first Dickens novel was *Pickwick* which I enjoyed, while I read most of the others with delight. Captain Marryat was a prime favourite and Samuel Lever pleased me. I liked humour and character, but a lively story interest was my chief demand.

Every Saturday Mama would give me a penny for a book at Miss Bell's Circulating Library, on condition that I got one for her. Her favourites were Mrs. Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood, but later in life she read detective stories with absorption. My own taste improved rapidly, so that I came to recognize quality in writing and to appreciate characterization and atmosphere. Between ten and twenty I did the bulk of my life-reading. What little knowledge I have of the classics I gained in those years. That was to follow later, however; in the meantime I pursued my adventures in the fiction of the day. It was exciting enough. Stevenson, Rider Haggard, James Reid, Besant and Rice—all held me spellbound, till I heard Papa shouting: "Come to bed!" And with head seething I crawled up the cockroach-haunted stairs to my room.

One day the Master announced to the class: "We have among us a budding Ben Jonson or maybe a suckling Shakespeare." With that he produced a manuscript he had found in my desk. It was a five-act historical tragedy and consisted of a scenario and the first act. In the end all the characters perished in a bath of blood.

The class laughed, so again I felt that sense of shame. I was furious with the Master, and if one of the boys twitted me about it in the playground, I flared up and was ready to fight.

After literature, my favourite was the drawing class. I loved to draw and would spend hours with pen and ink copying from books. Thus engrossed, time seemed to pass with amazing rapidity. When I was not boring into a book I was poring over an illustration and trying to reproduce it. I would gloat over the work of Phil May, Will Owen or Ravenhill, enjoying its smallest detail.

It was this love of drawing that took me every Saturday to the Public Library where I would take out old volumes of *Punch*. The jokes were often less than funny, but the pictures were more than interesting. So boyish was I that one of the clerks objected to issuing

me a book and called the head of the department. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Eleven, sir," I told him; whereat he looked at me benevolently through his spectacles.

"Well, you're the youngest reader we've ever had; but you seem to have a good head on your shoulders, so we won't discourage you."

Ah, those Saturdays in the Public Library, and my joy as I trudged three miles of streets to my city of books! At noon I would go to an eating place and have cake and tea over a marble-topped table. It cost twopence, but it was a feast to me. What matter the poor fare! I was young and free, and my capacity for bright dreams was unlimited. Never was I more happy, and this because I felt so blissfully *alone*. When other boys of my age were playing games and idling away their leisure, I was living in an imaginative world of my own.

I was never popular at school. I was too much of a lone dog and I disliked games. Only on the football field was I in demand because I weighed ten stone. As centre forward I was valuable in the scrum, but I thought it very stupid spending half the game in a pushing mob. I really preferred Soccer to Rugger. However, we were little snobs and thought the former too plebeian.

There was much competition to get into the team, so that we who made it were inclined to be cocky. We wore tasselled caps in the school colours. My shorts were very short, and when I walked to the football field I kept my macintosh partly unbuttoned, so that my bare knees might show. I imagined people saying: "Fine specimen of a lad. No doubt Captain of his school." Whereas no doubt they were thinking: "Silly young ass. Thinks himself a puling International." Maybe I did dramatize myself to some extent. Youth must have its dreams, its vanities. It needs a certain equipment of conceit to affront the realities of life. But the only time I distinguished myself in school football was when I split my shorts, and the opposing team was so convulsed with laughter at the sight of my bare buttocks that they allowed me to run in and score a try.

## *Chapter Three*

### *BAD BOY'S PROGRESS*

JUST as my class neighbour at my last school became Britain's brightest journalist, so my desk mate at this was destined to distinction. Though I could see no reason for it, he was called Stinkey. We all had nicknames. The boy in front of me was Monkey, the boy behind Piggy, while I was known as Beefy. In my case it was not unjustified, for I was chubby of cheek, my looks belying my dreamy and romantic nature. My rosiness began in babyhood, when girls would ask to kiss me; but their osculatory ardour passed with my perambulator age.

Stinkey was two years older than I. He wore cotton-wool in his ears and a flannel bandage around his neck. He had a suit of green velveteen, with stockings pulled over long drawers. Spectacles handicapped him for sports, though he was wistful to hold his own in games. I figured I could lick him, but he had read a lot and mentally he was miles ahead of me. In class he was abstracted, treating the proceedings with weary disdain. I, too, was the object of his scorn, for he rarely spoke to me. Once he remarked:

"I see you have a sense of balance. You avoid the head of the class and also the ignominious bottom. To be average is to be comfortable. My father says that the boys who succeed are never the boys at the top of their class. I could beat these blighters, but what's the use?" His father being a professor, I was inclined to believe there was something in what he said. Of the boys I have known who were brilliant in class, only one has made a name for himself. Perhaps it is because they had too few vices. Our educational system seems to put a premium on propriety. The good boys go to the pulpit while the bad ones get into Parliament. There is no morality in worldly success. Sinners perch on high seats while saints black their shoes.

Stinkey was torpid, but one day he amazed us. It was the examination and the Chief Inspector was giving us a quiz in history. Suddenly this boy seemed to awaken as from a trance. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes bright, as he absolutely stole the show. Question after question he answered before anyone else could get a chance, and always when we were stumped he came to the rescue. The

teacher looked at him in wonder, while the Inspector complimented him. Then Stinkey slumped into apathy again and we decided his brilliance must have been a flash in the pan.

He left school soon after, and I lost sight of him. Then some fifty years later I happened to read the obituaries in the *London Times* and there was a half-column devoted to him. He had entered the Indian Civil Service and become high-muck-a-muck to a Maharajah. He had been knighted and lived a life of glory. It was hinted that he had burned the candle at both ends and had returned home with health broken.

I expect that he concealed his board-school experience, as something not *pukka*. Our school was a model of constructive beauty and modern equipment, yet to every shabby private academy we were cads and bounders. And we accepted their patronage.

So my classmate became Sir Something Somebody and an honour to the Empire; but if he killed himself in the process, I would rather be a live nonentity than a dead knight.

About this time I had what I will call the adventure of the Corpse in the Cooling Room. I would not mention it if it were not another illustration of that strange compulsion that made me do things against my will. Near us was a deserted building known as the Western Baths. Its promoters had gone into bankruptcy and for many years it had been left to silence and decay. Most of the windows were broken, while grass grew to the mouldy doors.

One day, with two chums, I went exploring around the basement, when under a stairway we discovered a window that opened to our pressure. We peered into the dark interior fearfully, and with a sense of sinister menace. I said: "Come on, let's explore." But to my surprise the others hung back. Shudderingly they tried to pierce that evil gloom. "Come on, don't funk it. I'll go first," I challenged; but I could not taunt them into following me.

However, the idea haunted me, and I felt I must brave that blackness or be a coward in my own eyes. So next day I stole away and slipped through the window. It was quite dark as I groped over rubbish and rubble. Then a glum light guided me, and stumbling up some stairs I came to the main floor. I was staring into the huge swimming tank, now cluttered with debris. The light that penetrated the glass roofing was evil and dubious. My slightest move made a startling echo, and I had a feeling that mocking eyes were on me. The very walls seemed to laugh derisively. I wanted to run away, but something kept urging me on.

Furtively I pushed open a door. Beyond was the room where the Turkish bathers reposed. Under a glass cupola that grudgingly yielded a pallid light were two lines of velvet couches. They were

mouldy and gutted, and some rats scurried over them. Then I was conscious of a dreadful stench. I was shrinking back when suddenly I gasped with horror. Lying on a couch was the body of a man. His head was lower than his feet. I saw a black hole for a mouth and empty eyes. Through a mat of hair his face was the white of a shark's belly. His arms and legs sprawled wide, while one hand trailed on the rotted carpet. I had a feeling as if lice were creeping under my skin, and panting with fear I fled.

Oh, the joy of breathing clean air again! I decided to say nothing. No one had seen me go in, and I made sure no one would watch me leave. But the sight haunted me. I tried to make myself believe I had imagined it; I forced myself to think that the man was only a drunken derelict. But I could not sleep for the horror of it. I circled the building, fascinated as by an evil spell, while no power could have made me enter again.

Then we went away for our summer holiday by the sea. The vision faded in intensity, but it always loomed darkly in the background. I refused to look at the papers for fear I should read something about it; for I could not get rid of a feeling that I was involved in a gruesome crime. I should have told the police. Maybe I was what they called "an accessory." On the whole my summer was ruined. I dreaded returning home, but the time came when I must face the scene of my guilty secret. I must pluck up my courage and visit the window by which I had entered. To my intense joy it was boarded up. I could have danced with delight.

Then one day in school the door opened and two policemen entered. My stomach seemed to slump. Here was my Nemesis.

"Is there a boy called Service here?" The query fell like a knell on my ears. The teacher gave me a startled look. The boys, who had been frightened a moment before, sighed with relief. Every eye was turned on me. As I went out on the floor my legs seemed made of butter. I was preparing to make a full confession: "I did not kill him. . . . I swear I did not kill him . . ." when the policeman spoke:

"You did it. Admit you did it. You are the boy who *broke the lamp-post glass.*"

What a weight was lifted from me! I stoutly denied throwing the stone that broke the gas-light globe. In fact I had not seen it done. In fact I had been somewhere else. I protested my innocence, calling on my chum Silverman to testify that I had gone home peaceably on the afternoon in question. So the affair ended, and with it my last apprehension.

But it was through Silverman I was to have a rude shock to my vanity. He was my chief chum, a Jew boy, brave and bright, but

inclined to ironic humour. One day he came to me grinning all over.

"What d'ye think? . . . Pop's just been to see the Head. He's not satisfied with the progress his little hopeful is making and he wanted to know why. The answer is—*you!*"

"Me! How the . . . ?"

"Well, bad company corrupts good manners. You're supposed to be leading me astray. You're my evil genius."

"Me lead *you* astray! Why, it's the other way about. I'm continually trying to pull you back into the straight and narrow path. . . . But what happened?"

"Well, my parent complained, and the Head asked who my boon companion was. Your name was mentioned. Old MacWhiskers hummed and hawed. There were two boys of that name, he said. One was the best boy in the school, the other the worst."

"I know, but *that* boy's father's a Minister. He belongs to the apostolic side of the family; I belong to the alcoholic branch. I've told him I would punch his fat head, but they don't allow fighting in this goddam school."

"Yes, the Head went on to say this boy was a model pupil. He was destined for sure success, a paragon and an example to all. Whereas the other boy was a black sheep, lazy and incorrigible. He was inevitably doomed to disaster. In short, an egregious and unpredictable young pup."

"Is that all? Well, in that case you had better drop me and go with my precious namesake."

"Nothing of the sort. If you're going to the devil I might as well tail along. Come on, we'll buy a packet of woodbines and toast the health of old Whiskers in shandygaff."

Silverman was a leg-puller and he may have exaggerated; but I knew I was in evil odour and the shadow of expulsion loomed ahead. What hurt was the prophecy that I was fated to failure. Well, I would fail colourfully. Better that than drab mediocrity. But the thought worried me not a little. It was the first suggestion that I was of the vagabond breed and destined to die in a ditch.

My last year in school was an error in judgment. I wanted to go to sea. I dreamed of it night and day. How I would swagger in brass buttons and grow tough and strong! How I would come back with weird stories of wild lands! I spent every Saturday wandering the docks, regarding the ships and imagining the day when I would belong to that world of enchantment. But I was only thirteen and my parents refused to let me be a sailor. No, I must go to school for another year. Well, if I must, I would not do a darned thing. And I did not.

My rebellion began gradually. It took the form of cheeky retorts that made the boys laugh and the teachers savage. I became the class wise-cracker. For instance, as I was looking up a word in the dictionary I was so slow the Master growled: "It's easy seen you're not used to doing that." And I answered pertly: "On the contrary, sir; it's because I do it so often my arm is stiff and sore."

Another time the Head was taking us in French, and when he asked me a question on grammar I replied that I had forgotten the rule. He said sarcastically: "I suppose you'll be telling me you have forgotten your alphabet next."

"That would not be surprising, sir," I told him. "It is so long since I learned it."

This form of repartee, in which I was an adept, did not commend me to my various teachers, so in the end they ignored me. Then I would sit aloof and brooding, often drawing caricatures of them. I always hoped they would try to punish me, when I resolved I would stage a fight on the floor. But the Masters sensed this and left me alone. Besides, it was not on record to flog an eighth-grade boy. So I sat in insolent isolation, paying no heed to the lesson. I turned up late, nonchalant and moody. Things were rapidly coming to a head.

What brought about my dismissal was my defiance of the drill-master. He was an old soldier and fiery of nose and temper. He did not like me, but in virtue of my seniority I had command of one of the companies which we formed before marching into school. For we had a system of cadet training in which each class had its squad, the whole making a battalion.

On this particular day I was in a devilish mood. I had charge of the last company, and as a rule the drillmaster told us, "Battalion, march off from the front," but this time he shouted: "Battalion, march off from the *rear*."

He thought to catch me napping, hoping I would get balled up. In my confusion I said: "Company, right-about turn." They obeyed. Then suddenly I realized: Here I am, master of this company. I can make them do what I will. I regained my nerve. I would do something audacious. At first I thought I would order them into the street, so I gave the command: "Quick march." I could see they sensed some fun, they obeyed so readily. I gave them a left turn, flanking the battalion, then a right turn in front, and was wondering what to do next when I was aware of the Sergeant shouting at me. I turned to see him coming for me, his eyes blazing with fury. Now, I thought, he'll take over my company and disgrace me. How to save myself?

Right in front was a low building with the sign "W.C." in big

letters. Then I had an inspiration. "Left turn," I yelled. They needed no second bidding. An order was an order. Joyfully they marched forward and ended up, laughing and tumbling, in the heart of the school latrine.

Then I turned to the Sergeant. "Awfully sorry, sir. Lost my head. Piled my squad up in the privy. I am unworthy to command. I resign my position."

But the Sergeant made a complaint to the Head and I was called on the mat. He looked at me thoughtfully.

"You do not seem to be doing much good here." I cordially agreed. "Well, if you do not want to learn we cannot force you. But it seems a pity you should be wasting your time. No doubt there is some other sphere of action that must be worthy of your abilities. Perhaps it might be better if you ceased coming." He was sensibly sweet about it. It was really expulsion with kid gloves.

So ended my school days. I was glad, for I was eager for the adventure of life. I have never gone back to my old school. Some day I may revisit it. I can see myself addressing the senior pupils and giving them a pep talk on success in life. I will tell them not to be lazy and disobedient, as I was, and point to myself as a horrible example of how I failed to be a bright business man and a respectable citizen. I hope they will take my homily to heart and follow in the sober path of their fathers.



## *Chapter Four*

### *PROFILE OF PAPA*

**D**ESPITE his ten children and an income of two hundred pounds a year, Papa kept his three chins up and carried on gallantly. From the time he came into Mama's money, to his death some thirty years later, he never attempted to earn a living. Therein he showed his sagacity. To bring up a family of ten on two hundred pounds a year is a life task for any man, so why complicate it by attempting another job? He took over the management of the estate, as it were, and doled out its income with caution. Even Mama had to ask for every penny she spent.

Mama's father was a wise man who owned cotton mills. He left her about ten thousand pounds, with instructions that it was to be invested in Government securities, and that she was only to have the life interest. This was providential, because if Papa had been able to get his hands on the principal, I hate to think what would have happened to our little brood. He had a great opinion of his business ability and studied the stock markets assiduously. He would often talk of Rio something or other, and when he was cheerful we knew it had gone up, but when he was glum we guessed it was down. In the end, like everything he touched, something happened to wipe out his small stake. I see him now as a pathetic, frustrated figure, forced to live on his wife's income because he was incapable of making one of his own. But one thing I will say for him—he was one of the most abstemious men I have ever known. For three hundred and fifty-five days of the year he perched triumphantly on the water-wagon; then on the other ten he fell off with a mighty wallop.

Let no one point the finger of reproach at a man who is a model of sobriety all but ten days of the year. That is a record of which anyone should be elated, especially if he came of a hearty drinking family such as ours. Whisky was the national beverage and Scotland was proud of it. I had several relatives who cultivated snakes under glass, so I rate Papa high as a teetotaller. It is true that if he got even a whiff of strong liquor he was unable to stop there; so it was to his credit that for ninety-eight per cent. of the time he refused to let a drop of alcohol pass his lips. But the trouble was that he never

gave us any warning of his nose-dive from sobriety. When it was about due the suspense got on our nerves. On the street, talking to a girl, we would keep a wary eye for Papa in the distance, taking up the sidewalk. Or if at home we had friends visiting, we were fearful of him barging in on us with bibulous geniality.

One time we had a wealthy aunt staying with us when Papa developed a gloomy gaze and a mean manner. These were signs of a chute from sobriety; and sure enough that evening he announced his intention of going out for a whiff of fresh air. I waited till he was well away, then followed at a distance. I was only ten at the time, but I felt the honour of the family was at stake. When he got to the first pub he disappeared inside, and after a little hesitation I followed. I was prepared to do my little: "Father, dear father, come home with me now" stuff, and all braced for the part. He was standing up to the bar with a group of others, and before him was a tumbler of whisky. I went forward and took him by the arm. He turned round. At first his face showed amazement, then wrath.

"You young blackguard!" he shouted. "What are you doing in this haunt of iniquity?" The group around him looked uncomfortable and I looked crestfallen. So, taking *me* by the arm, he marched me out. "What were you doing in that den of vice?" he demanded again with virtuous indignation.

"What were *you* doing?" I said.

"That's none of your affair. But anyway I was there on business. One of those men is a baker and I was arranging for a supply of slightly stale bread at half-price. And over a glass of lemonade," he added indignantly.

I felt guilty. Perhaps it had been lemonade and his motives innocent. So on the way home I let him lecture me on the evils of strong drink, and he made me promise solemnly that I would never enter a pub again. After all, I had to admit that he was a good example to me, for his bibulous spells only lasted two or three days, after which he became very sick. Then for a while he was abject in his misery; then almost angelic in his remorse. So much did he look the suffering martyr he made us feel as if *we* had driven him into the embrace of John Barleycorn. So he would remain a model of "Wouldn't touch a drop of the beastly stuff!" . . . till the next time.

Between his half-Dundreary whiskers Papa had a moustache like a thatch. He was very moustache-conscious. He used to gnaw it a lot till it became grey and he had to ink it. He had a special cup with an inside shield to prevent his moustache getting wet when he drank tea, but when he drank water he had to squeeze it dry. His

head was brilliantly bald. It enraged him in hot weather when flies used it as a landing-field. Then he would whisk his paper and say "Dammit!", and Mama would say: "Now, Papa, remember the children," so that he would be abashed.

He shaved only twice a week. On the day he shaved he would look like a Member of Parliament, for he would wear his sprigged waistcoat and lavender spats. He had a Winston Churchill hat that looked as if it was the result of a *liaison* between a bowler and a topper. He was pompous and put on an English accent on these occasions, referring to men in position as "My old friend . . ." In short, you would have thought he was making at least a thousand pounds a year. On the second day, when his beard began to show, he would don a second-grade suit and look like a small-business man. On the third day he would dress like a tramp and wear a red handkerchief under his bristly chin. In this character he enjoyed taking the younger children out for a walk, especially if it was Sunday and he could meet the well-dressed crowd coming from church. I admired his sense of dramatic fitness, but if I asked anyone to the house I was careful to do it on Papa's shaving day.

He shaved with a cut-throat razor, for the safety kind had not then been invented. I used to sharpen my pencils with his best razor, though I could imagine his fury if he had caught me at it. I generally used a fine old razor with an ivory handle, and I felt rather remorseful when, on my beginning to shave, he made me a present of it. It was his favourite, and I shaved with it over half the world, finally having it stolen in the bunk-house of a California labour camp. I wonder what its ultimate fate was? Maybe it cut the throat of a nigger.

I think Papa realized that he was a failure, as far as concerned the affairs of public life, and tried to justify his existence by success in the domestic sphere. This took the form of having a large family and bringing them up on a small income. He tried to save every penny he could by buying in the cheapest markets, and every day he returned carrying big armfuls of food he had bought in the slum districts. Unluckily most of this was of inferior quality, and sometimes even unfit to eat. For instance, he would bring home apples that were half rotten, fish that smelt putrid, Irish butter tasting of turnips, eggs in which the yellow and white had wedded, and meat that was full of grubs. His idea was that money saved was money earned; but we, his poor family, were the ones who suffered from his penny-pinching. For personally he liked food best when it tasted high. He had a wonderful digestion and used to boast that never in his life had he experienced a headache. Tobacco had so dulled his sense of taste he could not enjoy anything unless it was full

flavoured. But he loved to eat, and for that reason our nourishment, if lacking in quality, was never wanting in quantity. We had eggs for breakfast, a hot midday dinner, a high tea, and a supper at nine in the evening of coffee and fried fish.

All evening he would read his paper and smoke. In smoking, too, he carried out his passion for economy. He smoked clay pipes that cost a penny each. He would cut and mix his own tobacco, and when his pipe was smoked he would knock the dottle on to the mantelpiece. When he loaded his pipe again he would carefully place the ashes on top. Then when the pipe got too dirty he would bury it in the fireglow and bake it clean. He always bought the *Evening Citizen*, which he read from beginning to end. For half an hour he would peruse it; then light his pipe and puff for another half-hour. As he smoked in silence his eyes would seem stern with reverie, though I don't think he had a single thought in his mind. But he surely enjoyed his pipe and his paper. We were so glad to see him passing a peaceful evening; for if he got restless and went out it was a sign of coming trouble. At half-past ten he would go yawning to bed.

In the line of clothes, too, his passion for economy asserted itself. Once he bought cheaply a bolt of the green cloth used for covering billiard tables and had suits for us four boys made of it. Then he forced us to wear them, and I always remember as I sat in class one day, attired in my pea-green suit, how my tiny brother entered dressed in one exactly similar. The boys laughed and even the teacher joined in, observing impertinently: "The Service Circus, meseems."

But his chief triumph in economy was in the shoe department. He bought a shoemaker's outfit and became an amateur cobbler. He then insisted on keeping all our shoes and boots in repair, furnishing the soles with hobnails and steel plaques, and the uppers with weird patches. Protestations were of no avail. We had to wear them, and proudly he would point to his handiwork. He would spend a whole day at his bench, punching, sewing, hammering, and chuckling at the thought that he was doing some shoemaker out of five bob. It is as a cobbler I best remember him, beaming benevolently through his spectacles, his sleeves rolled up, grey stubble on his chin. In such a moment he looked benignant and contented.

It will be seen from all this what an important part Papa played in our household. If he could not cut a swathe in the world of affairs he could at least be the big noise in his own home. By persistent paternity he bolstered up his self-respect, and if outsiders would not recognize him as a dominant personality he was determined his family would. But when we reached sixteen he very sensibly realized that

his mastery of us was over, and giving us each a latchkey allowed us to remain out till midnight.

He was highly moral, and though he never went to church, he forced us to go until we got beyond his control. Then he transferred his interest to the younger children, taking them walks like a nursemaid, or bringing them sweetstuffs, which he made them search for in his pockets. He was sentimental, and the only one, apart from the children, I ever heard cry in our home. Once one of my sisters was stricken with diphtheria, and was not expected to live through the night. We were called in to say a last good-bye, and I remember the funny sniffing noises Papa made. Small as I was I could not sleep that night. Though I had never paid much attention to my sister, the thought of her dying filled me with woe. But in the night she took a turn for the better, and in the morning we were told she was saved.

At first we had two maids, girls of sixteen whom we paid sixteen shillings a month; but when the family grew numerous we could not afford even that. It was then Papa became official dish-washer. Thus by menial abnegation he tried to make up for his failure as a bread-earner, though he would have been the very last to admit failure. To the end he had to kid himself that he was a success, and in his own way he was.

When I left for the New World a number of the boys came down to see me off. I was surprised, because I had never realized that I was so popular. However, they presented me with a silver flask and to my embarrassed shame they sang: "For he's a jolly good fellow."

I was wishing they would dry up when Papa appeared. The old man came running down the wharf, carrying a small package which he handed to me. Outwardly he was smiling a twisted smile, but I could see he was crying bitterly—inside. Well, I have always disliked displays of emotion, so I hurried on board the boat. As it edged out, I could see his very blue eyes in his very red face staring wistfully after me. Maybe I was doing what he would have loved to have done; for besides being a dreamer I think he would have enjoyed adventure. But his destiny was to bring up ten children on two hundred pounds a year. I cannot reproach him for his failings, for they were my own—laziness, day-dreaming, a hatred of authority and a quick temper. And even more than he, I had the equipment of a first-class failure. Yes, I hated to work for others, and freedom meant more to me than all else. I, too, was of the race of men who don't fit in.

After the boat left I opened his parting gift. It was a Bible. I am sorry to say I never read it. Yet I kept it sentimentally for many

years; and, in wild camps of thieves and vagabonds, that was the one possession no one ever tried to steal.

I never saw him again. He wrote to me many times, and in a final letter begged me to pay him a last visit. He pleaded: "Even if you cannot come, just write and say you will." Well, I never answered that letter, and I never went back, for I was far away in the Yukon making a book. Soon after, he died—at the same age as Grandfather, and of the same trouble—a stroke. I must confess I felt a sense of relief. His letters had become increasingly pathetic, and he was quite infirm. His passing would make things easier for my mother, who was much younger and who had borne a hard burden.

Yet I was sorry I had not done more for him, and had not pretended an affection I did not feel. But if I neglected him I am happy to think I brought some joy to his later days. He it was who took my first manuscript to the publisher and begged the newspaper men to give it a kindly write-up. Its instant success must have staggered him. I imagine how he must have strutted and bragged. Well, I like to think that his old age was brightened by my work and that he was happy reading my maiden effort. That is—if he did read it. If so, I think it would be the only book he ever read.

And at the end he was a stout abstainer; for on his death-bed when someone suggested a sip of brandy, he said indignantly: "Take the stuff away. Do you think I want to meet my Maker with the stink of alcohol on my lips?" These were almost his last words. . . .

A sentimental dreamer; kind to children and tender-hearted; a lover of freedom and good food—there have been worse men lauded to the skies, and I am grateful that here I am able to pay a small tribute to his memory.



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BOOK THREE

*YOUTH*





## *Chapter One*

### *FALSE START*

I HAVE always regretted that my parents thwarted my desire to go to sea. Most of my schoolmates went into offices, but a few entered the merchant marine. They vanished for a while to reappear with brass buttons and brazen tales of far adventure. They were objects of admiration, but when the time arrived for them to return to their ships they became strangely subdued and slunk into civilian clothes. No more buffeting the billows. It was too tough. I think I would have stuck it out long enough to get a good sea-ground for a writer. However, my father having frustrated my ambition to be a future Clark Russell, I did the next best thing. If I could not work on a ship I would work in a shipping office. So I got a job at ten pounds a year, to drudge from nine till seven, with a firm beginning in business. From the first I found something fishy about the boss. He believed that credit was capital and that a man could measure his wealth by the amount he could borrow. I have heard him say: "You can pay off old debts by making new. Governments do it; so what?"

He was sole partner in the firm which professed to be ship-owners, but I soon discovered that the ships existed in his imagination. The office was a bare room where there were a table and a copying press, little more. In his private room the boss had a roll-top desk where he would write letters by hand, giving them to me to copy and post. One day he wrote a batch of letters in prospectus form to friends of his very respectable family, mostly widows and clergymen. He invited them to invest their capital in his flourishing business of owning ships, when he would increase it one hundred per cent. His letters glowed with confidence, but to my dismay I found I had dropped them in the letter-box without affixing the necessary postage. There were no replies. I can imagine gentle old ladies in their country homes and choleric Colonels in their clubs sniffing because they had to pay twopence postage; then snorting, as they read the dazzling offer to allow them to share in an *El Dorado*. "How can he make our fortunes if he cannot afford to stamp his letters?" I could hear them say.

For want of a stamp, maybe a fortune was lost. Lost to my boss

anyway. But on the other hand I may have saved dear old creatures drawing their funds from Consols and losing them in a wild-cat concern. On the other hand I may have prevented them from really making a fortune. One never knows. My boss was a smart man and knew the shipping business. His idea was to charter and take options on vessels. Once he controlled them, I think he could have run them to advantage. All he needed was financial support, and perhaps it was his small and irresponsible office boy who thwarted him from becoming the founder of a great shipping line. Thinking about this I worried a great deal. As no replies came to his prospectus, my conscience pricked me. He seemed worried too, as morning after morning he examined his mail. Then one day he called me into his room. He had a letter in his hand and I recognized it as from his *fiancée*. I knew the handwriting, for I had read a previous one that was insufficiently sealed.

"I have here a letter from a young lady," he said severely. "She tells me that one I sent to her was unstamped. You posted it?"

"I'm sure I stamped it," I said earnestly. "Maybe the stamp came off in the mail."

"Well, in future put more moisture on your tongue."

I promised that, as his official stamp-licker, I would be more generous with my saliva, and there the affair ended.

I had to walk three miles to the office and trudge back the same distance, for carfare was beyond my means. Only rich people were able to afford the tramway. I carried with me a lunch made up at home, and washed it down with water from the office tap, which I drank from a tumbler faintly pink because the boss brushed his teeth in it. When I got home in the evening I was often too weary to eat supper, but I consoled myself: "Soon it will be pay-day, and I will be able to jingle money in my pocket. I will have ten times more than ever I had in my life." This thought bucked me up in my most desperate moments of fatigue. When pay-day came round I expected to see an envelope on my desk with sixteen shillings and eightpence in it. How I would gloat over the money I had earned so hardly! It would mean so much, two hundred pennies, over eightpence a day. I had it all figured out. I would buy a hot lunch and chocolates, of which I was passionately fond, and still have some pennies left over for pocket-money.

Well, the day arrived, but to my dismay no envelope was forthcoming. It will be for to-morrow, I thought. But no. However, on the third day I ventured to suggest that my pay was due. My boss seemed surprised and a little annoyed that I should dun him in this way. But he treated it as something that did not interest him very much. "All right; I'll pay you the end of the week," he promised

casually. But the end of the week came and no wages. Again I meekly suggested my need of money. I felt scared, as if I were asking for something I had no right to. And he acted as if it were effrontery on my part. Huffily he promised to pay me at the end of the following week, but he made me feel so importunate I dared not ask again.

About this time he began to grudge me money to buy stamps for his letters. He would grumble and say: "Dear me, you seem to spend such a lot on postage." Then he would check up my stamp book and admit grudgingly: "Seems all right. Well, here's a shilling."

I reflected: "He doesn't trust me. I believe he expects me to pay for his stamps out of my own pocket. He shouldn't write so many letters. They don't do him any good, anyway." Then, as I was often hungry and tired, I was driven to a form of petty speculation that haunted my conscience for years after. Even to-day it worries me. Perhaps there is some excuse for me in that I was so young. Honesty is not natural; it is grafted on us. I was too youthful to understand its expedience. Twopence a day would have made all the difference to me. For that I could have a mug of coffee and a bath bun. What courage that would give me to carry on! But I had no twopence. Then I had an idea. I would post two letters without stamps. I would select letters to big firms that would not be likely to complain, and I would change the firms every time. This was easy. It worked, and I do not suppose it did much harm.

But I could see that things were going from bad to worse with my employer. Creditors were haunting the office and the janitor was calling daily for his rent. I got orders to tell all callers that my boss was out, and I developed a special technique in handling them. I would enter the private room and stare solemnly around it. The boss, by this time, had the jitters, and would be cowering behind his roll-top desk. I would stare at him blankly as if he were invisible, then return to the outer office saying blandly: "No, he has gone out, but he has left a note on his desk to say he will be back at three." The creditor would go away grumbling, and my boss would emerge cautiously. "You needn't be so damn realistic about it," he would snap, but no doubt thought he had a very smart office boy.

However the crisis was approaching, and soon he could no longer hide behind the roll-top desk. One day he told me to spy on the janitor, and when the man was out of the way he had two draymen come and remove that piece of furniture. Next day I saw it in a nearby auction-room, and I guessed the end was near. I no longer worried about my salary, for I knew I was only a ranking creditor on the estate, if any. Next morning the boss did not turn

up, and I never saw him again. He had taken the letter books, and all that remained was the big copying press on which I had expended a month of muscular effort. I often wondered what became of him. He deserved fortune, for he had a bold, active mind. Perhaps he succeeded, and died with honour and dignity; but if so he must have been more discriminating in his choice of an office boy.

## *Chapter Two*

### *LAUNCHED IN LIFE*

ONE day I said to my father: "Papa, I'd like to go into a bank."

"Why, my son?"

"Because they have lots of money, I'll be sure of my pay. Also one gets all the holidays there are—and then some."

He beamed his agreement, for banking had been his own job. So, selecting his shaving day, he dressed up with his Winston Churchill hat, his sprigged waistcoat and his lavender spats, and we went off together to his old bank. There he introduced me to clerks of his youth who had risen to position and power. My application was made, and soon after a certain branch wrote to say that they needed an apprentice, and would I present myself.

The office was only two miles from home and the way lay through a lovely park. Here would be a healthful walk for me; while the bank itself, situated in the vicinity of a slum, looked humanly interesting. Standing at a corner, it had all the allure of a licensed establishment; indeed, it was frequently taken for one by the drunken dockers of the neighbourhood. It was, then, with favourable consideration I interviewed the Manager and Accountant. The first was big and ruddy, the second small and pallid. Both won the seal of my approval, and I decided that here was where I belonged. But there emerged what seemed an insuperable obstacle. The bank did not take apprentices under fifteen and I was just fourteen. The rule was definite. What was to be done? The Manager rose to the occasion. "You look a good sixteen," he said. "I'll take you up to head office and get their consent. Then you'll be the youngest apprentice in the service."

So next day I accompanied him to Edinburgh, where in a staid old square was a stately building that had been the heart of the bank from time immemorial. It had an air of fruity permanence that appealed to me. I felt it was worthy of me. Scotch banking was said to be the best in the world, and here were bankers so sagacious they looked like owls. It thrilled me to think that one day I should look like that. So I was exhibited and duly sanctioned. They did not say: "Ha! a worthy addition to the staff," but I imagined they were thinking it, and that they were really proud to

welcome me to their ranks. As soon as we reached the street, however, the Manager dropped me like a hot potato. He gave me a bun and his blessing and directed me to the station. Then he bustled off, looking very happy. I got the impression he had a girl friend in the city, and this was a diversion in an otherwise dull life.

My salary was to be twenty pounds a year for five years, but no increase was promised after that. And in fact in my seventh year I was still getting a hundred dollars a year for my services. I did not complain, however. It paid for my clothes, my lunch and left me a fair amount of pocket-money. At first it was wonderful to gain so much, but latterly it hardly seemed adequate.

The great thing was that the work was easy. I always had a prejudice against hard work, or indeed any work. I would rather do little for poor pay than strain myself for a big salary. So here I was well suited. I would get down to the office at half-past nine in the morning. There would be half an hour for lunch; then a walk to the chief office to collect the clearing-house cheques. I would take an hour to do this, walking, so that I might pocket the pennies allowed me for carfare. At four by the clock I would lock the front door and go home. And there were the holidays. It seemed we were always having them, especially Bank Holidays which no one else had.

But though I was justified in pocketing my carfare, an early experience in the bank convinced me that honesty was the best policy. Sometimes towards the end of the month I would find myself a little short of cash, so I would borrow a few shillings from my stamp box, making it good on pay-day. This was a reprehensible proceeding of course, but was frequently practised by juniors. It was so well known that the Accountant used to advise me the day before he proposed to check up my stamp account, giving me time to make good any deficiency. One morning I arrived very late at the office, to find a strange man there. I did not like the look of him and was in nowise reassured when he gazed at me grimly through steel-rimmed spectacles. He had a dirty grey beard and a peevish expression. He gave me no greeting but looked up sourly at the clock.

"Mr. Sleeth, the Inspector," whispered the Accountant. I felt a heart vacuum. Old Sleeth was the most dreaded of all the inspectors, mean, malicious, vindictive. As I looked at that grim visage I thought of my stamp account. I knew it was about five shillings short. I was caught. He lost no time, pouncing on me like cat on mouse. "Here, my boy, I'll have your stamp box."

Reluctantly I surrendered it. There was spiteful joy in his eyes as he took it, along with my postage book. There was pleased

malice on his face as he proceeded to balance them. White and shaking, I watched him. It was all up, I thought. Disgrace, dismissal, ruin. My life blasted, and all for a measly five bob. So there I stood, waiting for the blow to fall. How slow he was, how careful! I think he knew he was prolonging my agony. Then at last he finished. He laid down book and box. His manner was grimmer than ever. Yet there was no triumph in it. In fact, his face wore a distinct look of disappointment.

"Is it all right?" said the Accountant, who had been hovering anxiously near.

"No, it's no' all right. There's jist a wee matter of . . ." Here he paused, looking at me searchingly for a long moment . . . "A wee matter of tippence . . . *over*." My heart gave a bound. I tried to tell myself that perhaps I had not borrowed five bob after all, or that I had paid it back in an absent-minded fit. But the affair was closed. I was saved.

And in this connection let me observe that at various times in my existence I have had the notion that I had a Guardian Angel. Perhaps most of us who survive the dangers of life have had this feeling, and no doubt it is illusory. But in my case it has happened so often I am inclined to yield to the idea that someone in another dimension is interested and protective where I am concerned. Oh, I know it is unworthy of a stout materialist like myself, but feeling and believing are sometimes hard to reconcile; and, though I scoff at the theory of a Special Providence, I like to entertain its suggestion of guidance and protection.

But to explain the mystery of the stamp account. That night when the others had gone I balanced my postages again. There it was, a deficit of over five shillings. Then I saw where old Sleeth had made his mistake. There were a large number of postcards used for acknowledging letters. The Inspector had calculated them at a penny each instead of a halfpenny. It was incredible he should make such a stupid mistake. But he did, and the difference just about made up my deficit. This was a lesson to me. I vowed that from then on I would be scrupulously honest—at least in small things. As a politician once told me: "Never be crooked unless you can be so in a big way."

And here I would like to say a word in favour of the Accountant who served over me for so long. With the Manager I had few contacts. He never consulted me in the management of the branch, but our relations were always pleasant and he gave me entire satisfaction. With the Accountant, however, I co-operated personally and am prepared to give him as hearty a testimonial as the one he gave me. He deserves it, for I must have been rather a trying under-



ling. It was obvious I had no vocation for banking, and the only reason I stuck to it was that it was an easier job than any other. Curse this business of making a living! I have always regarded it as a necessary evil. Although I was in the banking business for fourteen years, I never discovered what it was all about. One of my old managers once told me I was the worst clerk he had ever known, and I agreed enthusiastically. If he had said the "best" I would have been seriously perturbed. In imagination I see a tombstone inscribed: *Here lies a first-class bank clerk.* But even of that epitaph I am unworthy.

And though my work was easy, I tried to make it still easier. I dawdled over my daily errands and dreamed over my ledger. I made rhymes as I cast up columns of figures. It was so pleasant, with a big fire warming the spine. I crooked over my desk. Through the plate-glass window I could watch the cold grey street, where sailors and longshoremen met and wrangled. There were all sorts of Dickens-like characters meandering from pub to pub and an atmosphere of picturesque squalor that charmed me. I would gaze pensively from my high stool till a customer aroused me from my torpor.

Then I took to writing verses during office hours, and this was the last straw as far as my Accountant was concerned. One day he grabbed a piece of paper I was scribbling on. It availed him little, however. I saw him gazing with stupefaction at the line spaced at intervals: "But that was yesterday." It was the refrain of a three-verse poem I was writing. I had the framework laid down, and all that remained was to fill in the body. Thus early was I adopting one of the tricks of the trade. My Accountant was mystified.

"What was yesterday?" he demanded with some indignation.

"That," I answered vaguely.

He had never read a verse of poetry in his life and would not have been sympathetic to my efforts to scale the slope of Parnassus instead of columns of figures. For he was a son of the soil. His father was a Fife farmer, and he had lived on the farm till he was sixteen. He remained bucolic-minded. His eyes would brighten at the sight of a nice horse, and he loved to talk of crops or cattle. His ambition was to become manager of a small country branch, and his grievance was that, though he was almost forty, he was still a city accountant. But no one could have seemed less agricultural. He wore oversized morning coats that gave him the look of a beetle, while his legs were encased in tight, striped trousers. He had a pale moon face and beautiful white teeth, possibly because he did not smoke. Neither did he drink alcoholically. I do not think he had a single vice. After work he trotted home to his wife and they went walking arm in arm. Naturally they had no children.

This was the man with whom I was associated for seven years. He had little education but much sound sense. He was limited in outlook, but sterling and upright. He often told me I was an original, but he was tolerant. To this day I thank him for his patience to one whom he was trying to steer in the narrow path of commercial righteousness.

But to return to my poem. I polished it off without difficulty. The first verse was introductory; the second developed the theme; the third climaxed it. There were four lines to each verse and the fourth, carried the refrain: "But that was yesterday." It was dead easy to do. I was smugly pleased with it, so I sent it to a boys' paper called *Ching Ching's Own*. Two weeks after it appeared in the correspondence column with the comment by the Editor: "You've got it bad, old fellow. But cheer up. You'll get over it." This referred to the last line, which ran:

Alas! my love is false to me,  
But *that* was yesterday.

This, then, was my first published poem, and I never showed it to a soul. The reason was that the Editor had hit the nail on the head. For the first time in my life I was infatuated. She was a girl called Maisie McQuarrie, the perfection of prettiness. I do not say beauty, just adorable prettiness. She had the saccharine pulchritude of an expensive wax doll: her eyes the blue of lustrous gems, her mouth like a cherry, her complexion roses and cream. She was a picture of sweetness I hardly dared gaze at, so much did it take my breath away. To the last I never had one square look at her, but the mental image that haunted me night and day was one that in glamour exceeded the reality.

Yes, I had it bad. If I met her on the street, my legs wobbled and my bowels seemed to turn to water. I pretended elaborate indifference, hoping she would give me a passing glance, but I do not think she ever did. From the beginning of my infatuation to its disastrous finish I did not address a word to her. If I had spoken I would have stammered and choked. However, I never got a chance. I had to content myself haunting the street in which she lived and gazing up at the window I thought might be hers, hoping to see her shadow on the blind. I would try to meet her coming home from school, but when I saw her approaching I would dart in panic down a side street. All I could do was to write poetry about her, and most of my spare time was given to this. It was the poetry of renunciation and despair. I wished I could send it to her but I dared not. One piece I wrote was called *Love's Lament*. The first verse ran thus:

There is nothing more to say  
Since my hope so vain has proved;  
Only now to go my way,  
I the loving, you the loved;  
I to love and still to sigh,  
Hoping on for brighter day. . . .  
Save the saddest word: Good-bye,  
There is nothing more to say.

It consisted of the usual three verses, and there was a slickness about it that pleased me. In the second verse there was a couplet I fiked:

Love's exultant roundelay  
Issues in a wail of pain.

In fact, I was so tickled with it that, being Scotch, I saved it up and used it on three later occasions under somewhat similar but less reticent circumstances.

However, my verse-making did not get me any further with Maisie. The only time I ever really got near to her was in church, for the McQuarrie family had a pew behind ours. So about this time my family must have been puzzled by my sudden zeal for church-going. Perhaps they thought I had got religion. No doubt I had, but my divinity was a dainty creature in a muslin dress and a hat trimmed with forget-me-nots. Never would I have missed morning service. Even on the wettest day I would trudge to church. I, who had regarded the sermon as a bore, now found it all too short. I, who had said that one could worship God best in green fields, and who had declared that the truest prayers were gratitude for the sunshine and the breeze, now looked forward to the moment I could take my place in the family pew. That was my bit of paradise.

Not that I ever dared look at Maisie, but her very nearness filled me with joy. I could at least *smell* her, for she used a faint perfume. And sometimes by squinting round I could get a glimpse of her, but I dared not do this very often. Did she notice me? I wondered. Did she ask herself who was the poetic youth with the air of romantic melancholy? He must be someone unusual, perhaps a genius. I was sorry my face was so plump and red, and sucked my cheeks in to make my profile more interesting. I only hoped I was making an impression.

I quarrelled with my chum Silverman on her account. I used to rave about her, till one day, irritated by my dithyrambics, he said: "Oh, give us a rest. Your girl may be an angel to you, but she is human. She evacuates her bowels like yourself." I was horrified, and I hotly denied it. "No, not like me, no . . ." Then I realized

that the chemistry of the body applies to us all and angrily I refused to argue the point.

I mention this to show how enamoured I was, and how I put my lady-love on a pedestal. I could not bear to think of her in any carnal sense. And this went on for seven months. Then came the outrageous climax.

The McQuarries were a snooty family. They lived in Sunnybrae Crescent, whose residents disdained Roselea Terrace and sniffed as if the air of our street was polluted. Mr. McQuarrie was a high official in the railway, and their house had three stories. His wife was thin and supercilious, and he was bony of face with a choleric eye. If he noticed me at all it was as a little whipper-snapper, quite unworthy of his notice. He was always dressed very smartly, with a fine frock-coat and a shiny top-hat. Well, it so happened that one day I arrived very late for church and hurried to my place. The congregation was singing the first hymn when I pushed into my seat. I was conscious of Maisie looking at me in an amused way, so flustered was I. I was aware of Mr. McQuarrie directly behind me, singing lustily in a voice like a corn-crake. Then as I sat down to make the usual perfunctory prayer, I was further aware of a dreadful cracking sound. It dominated the singing; it curdled my blood! it paralyzed me with horror. . . . I was sitting squarely on Mr. McQuarrie's gleaming silk topper.

Will I ever forget the sickening sensation as it buckled under me, and my too tardy reflex as I rose with a startled "Oh!" I was aware of the petrified stare of its owner. He suspended his singing, looking aghast as he realized what had happened. I turned to face him. He held out his hand for the hat. I took it up, but before I gave it to him I instinctively put my hand inside and straightened it out. I remember the big cracks and the drunken, disreputable look of it. It was squashed almost flat. With a most unchristian look on his face he snatched at it. And it was then, I am afraid, I added insult to injury, for I said the thing that came into my head. As I tried to push it back into shape I stammered: "Awfully sorry, sir. Pity it wasn't your opera hat; then it wouldn't have mattered, would it?"

At that, for the first and only time, Maisie smiled. I will always treasure the memory of that smile, for I knew the game was up. At last I had made an impression, though not the one I had intended. And on my way home as I watched Mr. McQuarrie trying to look dignified under his battered tile, I realized that he would never be my future father-in-law. Then somehow the humorous side of it struck me. I laughed, and suddenly the spell was broken. I was free from the thrall of love, and how happy I was! Maisie could go to the devil now. I no longer cared for her.

And yet I must have treasured a sneaking regard, for years after, when I heard she had determined to earn her own living and was going to Normal School, I wrote a ballade about her. It happened I was experimenting in that form at the time, so I began :

You've pupil teacher turned, they say,  
And at the knowledge I declare  
I wish I were a child to-day,  
That pupil I might claim your care;  
Ah, then how gladly would I fare  
Each day to your sweet presence free,  
Each day to hear with eyes astare  
The lesson that you taught to me.

And so on, three verses and the *envoi*. It was a perfect specimen of the ballade form and written mainly for practice. But, caring little, I sent it to her anonymously. Imagine then my surprise, some years later, when I saw my ballade in the poets' corner of the *Weekly Herald*. It was printed as I wrote it, but it bore other initials than mine. Not Maisie's either. I wondered who had stolen it. It amused me, but at that time I had switched from poetry to another of my interests and I was too careless to investigate. . . .

I have a sudden doubt. Was her name not Daisy? It may have been. Funny how one can go off one's chump for a girl and later on hardly remember her name. Well, she was a lovely lass. I'll bet she made some man a perfect wife, but I have never regretted it was not I.

## Chapter Three

### POETICAL PERIOD

MY seven years with the Scotch Bank divide themselves into periods of about twelve months. In each my companions were different, and as the new scene developed, I turned my back upon the old. In that way I gained a varied experience but estranged myself from my friends. Not that I suppose they cared much. In their eyes I was a queer chap, capricious and unpredictable.

My first period I will call my poetical year, for in it my chief interest was poetry. I always carried a book of poems in my pocket and would read it at every odd moment—even on the toilet-seat. I had a tiny Tennyson and a brownie Browning. I was especially fond of the latter. I called it my “bob’s worth of Browning” because it cost that sum. Walking in crowded streets I would read these books, and even crossing in the midst of traffic I would be deep in one of them. Several times I narrowly escaped being run over. Both poets were then alive and I wonder what their emotions would have been had they heard that a young boy had been knocked down by a street-car while reading *Ulysses* or run over by a bicycle while deep in *A Toccata of Galuppi*. Incidentally, street-cars were drawn by horses while bicycles were of the bone-shaker variety.

Browning and Tennyson were the big stars in my poetical sky, and even to-day the poems I have mentioned mark the peak of my appreciation. But it was to minor bards I turned for real enjoyment. Now unread and unremembered, Owen Meredith and Coventry Patmore were inspirations to me, and I believed in their immortality. Even more I liked verse-makers. Thackeray and Tom Hood were my favourites, and I took them as models. I preferred verse with lots of rhyming, such as *The Raven* and the *Pied Piper of Hamelin*. I was always in love with rhyme. If two lines could be made to clink it seemed to me to go a long way to justify them. Perhaps it was because I had such facility in that direction. I could take a paragraph from the paper and turn it into doggerel, while at home I often spoke in stanzas. Rhyming has my ruin been. With less deftness I might have produced real poetry.

As soon as I discovered that rhyming presented no difficulty, I

began to exploit my gift. My first effort was called *The Song of the Social Failure*. It had three verses and a refrain which ran:

The Might Have Been, the Might Have Been,  
The haunting, taunting Might Have Been;  
We all can hear in our hearts, I ween,  
The grim reproach of the Might Have Been.

I wonder if the Editor who printed my morbid and disillusioned poem had any suspicion that his contributor was a beardless boy? But it is often like that. Youth apes age, and in my poetic cradle I found inspiration in the grave.

My next effort was a comic one. It was called: *It Must Be Done*. The idea came to me one wintry morning, as I poised over my icy bath. It began:

He stands upon the water brink  
With pale and anguished brow,  
And shudders as he murmurs low:  
"It must be done—and now."

There were the usual three verses and the last two lines packed the surprise:

It's over now . . . he's only had  
*His morning bath*—no more.

Italics, of course, for the essential punch. I was wise enough to know that three verses were the limit of a reader's tolerance; but I had yet to learn that I must never let rhyme beat me. As I advanced, incomplete rhyming seemed to me sloppy and amateurish. I sent this effort to a paper called *Scottish Nights*; and two weeks later, on buying a copy, with a penny and a pounding heart, I was amazed to see my verse on the front page. I was still more surprised when I received a letter containing a postal order for half-a-crown. That was a great day, though little did I dream that my wonderful half-crown was the portent of future fortune. The Accountant cashed my order with enthusiasm, while even the Manager seemed tickled with my success. They saw me from a new angle, and I blushed and decided it must be an accident. One didn't make money like that.

Neither one did, I decided a month later, when I sent to the *People's Friend* a poem of a serious character. It was called *Shun Not the Strife*—which incidentally was the one thing I did shun. The first verse ran:

Shun not the savage brawl of Life,  
O you who would divorce your soul  
From self and win love's highest goal!  
Shun not but mingle with the strife.

It, too, was published promptly . . . on the last page. Probably on account of the nobility of its sentiments the Editor did not insult

me by offering me filthy lucre for it. So I learned early in the game that verse may pay, but poetry is its own reward.

I went back to writing light verse, and got several of my pieces into a local paper. They brought favourable comment but no cash. However, it was a bright little rag and I was pleased to see my stuff in it. Although I only affixed my initials to my work, with the vanity of sixteen I began to fancy a few were taking notice. But even the Editor, who never refused my contribution, had no idea who I was, and I was too timid to visit him.

About this time I was attracted by Form. A series of pocketable books were being published under the title of the *Canterbury Poets*. One was devoted to French patterns, while the second was called *A Century of Sonnets*. I read both with avidity, and soon I was experimenting with ballades and sonnets. Their very difficulty was a challenge to me. I accomplished several ballades and a sequence of sonnets. I had a peculiar way of working. I would choose easy rhymes, write them in a string and pick out the likeliest. With these I would make the rhyming ends of my sonnet or ballade. Once having set up this framework I would write in lines to suit my rhymes. A carpenter job you will say. Maybe, but it worked. I did not know anything about the mechanics of verse. Even to-day I do not know what is an iambic or a trochee. To me scansion was a matter of ear, and if one followed good models one could not go wrong. I aped Keats for sonnets and Austin Dobson for ballades, and turned out fair imitations of each. It was good practice and great fun, but the secret of my success was my joy in jingles.

By the time I was sixteen I had contributed over a score of poems to weekly periodicals. I never had a single rejection. This was because I had the good sense not to send them to a paper unless they had a seventy-five per cent. chance of acceptance. I gauged this by the poems they had already accepted; in fact I often modelled my own on these. I never read a poem I admired but what I tried to emulate it.

I think this year must have been the happiest I spent in the bank. With my books of poems I walked through the lovely park, lingering in pleasant places, dreaming and reciting. Yet I never attained a very high mark in my poetic appreciations. It took me an effort to enjoy Keats and Shelley, while I had to force myself into the proper mood for Milton and Wordsworth. The peak of my poetic taste I found in Tennyson and Browning.

One day I met my slum-school classmate Jimmy. He was as dynamic as ever. He seemed to gobble life voraciously. He asked me to visit his home. It was a gloomy house in a dreary street, but his personality pervaded it till it was as gay as a pub. He revealed a new



enthusiasm. He had just discovered the music-hall. He sang songs from the repertoires of Bessie Bellwood and Marie Lloyd and infected me with his enthusiasm. Then his brother, the artist, joined us. Although some years younger he high-browed us, but little did I think that one day he would receive a knighthood. In the background hovered twins, one of whom became captain of an Atlantic liner and an author of note. It was Jimmy who first mentioned the name of Kipling to me, quoting some of his verse. . . .

The result of this visit was that I went to the music-hall and found it more harmless than I had hoped. Hearing a girl sing *After the Ball*, I wrote a parody called: *Under the Mould*.

After the fight is over,  
After the strife is done,  
After the bells are pealing  
After the triumph won;  
What is life's sum of glory  
When all the tale is told?—  
A shroud and a feast for the blindworm  
UNDER THE MOULD.

The profound pessimism of callow youth! At sixteen how I revelled in the macabre. It was as if I were ending my days instead of beginning them.

Another boy I knew in those days was a sandy-haired youth who smoked cigarettes and dressed dapperly. He had a lazy, humorous regard and a nonchalant manner. Because he was some years older than I and knew some reporters, I held him in awe. Then one day a paper-covered publication appeared on the book-stalls. The title was *Wee MacGregor*. Almost overnight it catapulted its author to fame. He became a professional writer and never looked back. Though none of his books had the success of his first, many of them had more merit. A real writer, humorous and original—though in his youth he high-hatted me, I salute his shade.

When I look back I am impressed by the number of lads I knew who have won distinction. And among these bright boys I cut a poor figure. I was regarded as a nonentity, so that in moods of gloom I felt I was destined to fail. Indeed most people patronized me, for I was shy and shabby. But when I smarted under a snub I got out my copy-book in which were pasted my accepted poems. Reading them reassured me; yet for fear of ridicule I showed them to few. And looking over them years later I was surprised by their competence. Technically I could find little fault with them. I shirked no rhyme. My measure was exact. Most of my pieces were on the three verse pattern—attack, build-up and pay-off, I called it. That my formula was a good one was proved by acceptance. The proof of a poem is in the printing.

That may be due, perhaps, to the judgment I showed in the selection of papers. Although I only wrote to please myself (and no one can do otherwise) in the end I tried to please my editors, who in turn tried to please the public. Instinctively I knew what they preferred, and perhaps I unconsciously catered to them. But I was so young, and to be published gave me such a thrill. After all, what I wrote was only newspaper verse, neat but negligible. I was conscientious in my craftsmanship, and the careless rapture of my lyrics was the result of patient toil.

However, my passion for poetry was nearing its end. It had a final flicker when I discovered Bret Harte and Eugene Field and added them to my models. But soon after I developed a fed-up feeling that ended in revolt. I began to dislike poetical words and to prefer blunt Saxon speech. Then I grew sick of the subject-matter of verse, such as mythology and nature. Why should poetry concern itself with beauty and not with ugliness, which is just as fascinating? Why should it deal with virtue when vice is more interesting? Why did poets write about flowers and love and the stars? Why not about eating and drinking, and lusts and common people? I was a rebel. Poets, I complained, cared more for the way of saying things than for the thing said. I was tired of ideals and abstractions. Flowery language, words musically arranged and coloured like a garden—no, I did not react to that any more. Poetry farewell!

But I stuck to verse. Though I turned from nectar I still liked beer, I could rhyme with the best and make verse with facility. But I practised it less and less, and the time came when I confined my efforts to limericks, of which the least said the better.

So ended my poetical period. It was a happy one and no doubt served me well. Though for years I did not write another line, that early training was not wasted. For when I began again to make verse it came as easy to me as slipping off a log.

## Chapter Four

### ARTIFICIAL ATHLETE

"SO you're going to ditch your little slut of a Muse," said MacSporran.

"I'm giving up poetry, if that's what you mean."

"Congratulations. You know I hate the stuff. *Æsthetic* exhibitionism, I call it. It's indecent to expose one's emotions in print. But verse is all right. You did some things in *Quiz* that were quite good. Very amusing. Why don't you stick to that? Instead of writing about orchids, write about fried fish. Even I could enjoy a poem about fried fish."

"Thackeray wrote one about fish soup. . . . But I'm washed up with poetry; verse too. I won't write another rhyme as long as I live."

"I don't believe it. The dog returns to his vomit. But what new bee has the little boy got in his bonnet now?"

"I'm going in for SPORT."

"Splendid! Right up my alley. If I can't be an athlete myself maybe I can create one. Put yourself in my hands. Let me be your guide and mentor."

The great grief of MacSporran was that as a boy he had strained his heart tossing the caber and was obliged to give up games. But he was an authority on sport of all kinds and a most interesting chap. I admired him a lot, though I was conscious that he patronized me a little. However, most people did and I accepted it humbly. I looked up to MacSporran, especially as he was six foot something. His face, like mine, was ruddy, and when we walked together Silverman said we looked like a lobster and a shrimp.

MacSporran was in a law office and had the gift of the gab. He was such a clever chap I wondered why he bothered with such a Witless Willie as I. One day I asked him. He replied: "You're no end of a silly ass, but you have moments when you are what we Highlandmen call *fey*."

"I was born at the full of the moon."

"That may have something to do with it—moon-madness. To be interesting one must be five per cent. daft. Maybe we all are. I would give you ten per cent.; but though you are unbalanced at times I feel you are basically sane."

"I'm so glad you think I'm not crazy."

"Definitely not. Liable to mild mad-spells, but sound in the main. These sudden switches of yours from one field of enthusiasm to another are no doubt conditioned by the law of Cause and Effect. You will always be subject to brusque reactions. You may be a carnivorous addict one day and a vegetarian crank the next. And now it seems you want to leap from æstheticism to the athletic field. Well, that is interesting. Let me handle you. I want to feel like God."

So I let him mould me, and the men to whom I had talked poetry saw me no more. They were amazed at my sudden lack of interest, and turned their backs on me. I did not mind, for my new chums were stout lads who read nothing but the sporting papers, drank beer and affected an exaggerated manliness. I played up to them, buying a bull-dog pipe and tilting my bowler at a sporting angle. I must say I felt better living physically than mentally. My thoughts went outward instead of inward, dwelling on food and drink and keeping fit. MacSporran complimented me on the improvement in my looks.

"I maintain that the carnal life is best," he said. "Thinking is the curse of the human race. The more that one can decently approximate to the animal the happier one will be. But now let me see how I can exploit you in the world of sport. What can you do?"

"At school I used to play Rugger because it was more swank than Soccer. But I detest the scrum."

"Well, you're not dashing enough for a half-back nor foxy enough for a quarter. How about full-back?" I beamed. I had always admired full-backs, standing so calmly with their arms folded; then, at the critical moment, dashing in to save the situation. I saw myself a full-back, strong, silent, dependable. MacSporran went on: "We must approach the problem scientifically. What are the attributes of a full-back? Kicking and tackling. Now the best kicker I know is that stuffy little man who plays for the Queen's Park. He dashes between two dribblers and the ball soars like a poem to the sky."

"But that's Association. I'm a Rugby man."

"Classy kicking belongs to your game too. And though your right leg may lack the force for dream kicks, I have an idea. We will go to a cobbler I know, and have him make a special pair of boots for you. They will be heavily loaded with lead in the toes, and broad and bevelled so as to make an aggressive contact with the ball. Your toe will be an avenging bullet that will punish the leather sphere so that it will float aloft at your lightest touch."

I remember the first practice game I wore my secret boots. At the

beginning the others did not notice. They thought my fine kicking accidental, then they began to remark on it. Easily I could outkick anyone in the field. I was sure, strong, brilliant. I amazed myself and was exultant.

"As a kicker your stock is rising," said MacSporran. "Now let's see about tackling. We are told to tackle low. Take a running dive at your opponent's shins. Well, that takes nerve, and means a bit of bruising. Let's go to the country where you can practise being a human projectile." So we walked till we found a bit of greensward where I launched myself into space till I was black and blue. He was like a trainer, giving me no respite, so that I damned his interest in me. Then in September I took my holiday on a farm, where I practised in the hay, hanging up a sack of bran to the barn-beam. Time and again I catapulted myself forward, grabbing two imaginary legs. To minimize the shock on the hard ground I got a helmet and gloves; then, wearing three woollen sweaters, I awaited my chance.

"I only play full-back," I told the Captain. "Sort of specialized in that position."

He distrusted me; but, his regular back having failed him, he gave me a trial. I must have looked funny with my three sweaters, my helmet and my gloves. As I stood there I felt admiring eyes were on me, and I feared I might not justify my formidable equipment. To my surprise I played a perfect game. Three times did I go into action, grabbing my men by the ankles, so that they almost turned a somersault. By tipping up their feet I made them tumble hard. I wanted to intimidate them, so that they faltered in their headlong career. And as for my footwork, time after time did I hear the cry: "Well kicked!"

MacSporran was pleased with his *protégé*. "I have created a full-back," he said. "And now I am going to be your press-agent." He sent an account of the match to the sporting editions of the papers, in which my name figured flamboyantly. My position was assured; I finished the season in a simmer of satisfaction.

But in my last game the devil got into me. "Why cannot a back score? Anyone else can make a touch-down and get the glory of it, but the poor back is debarred." I was thinking thus when I saw the ball walloping toward me and I collared it. Then instead of kicking I began to run. I think the field was too astonished to do anything about it. They imagined I had gone mad. So as they gaped and hesitated I ran for all I was worth. I dodged a half-back, pushed over a quarter, ran round the full-back, and touched the ball down behind the posts. The crowd cheered and laughed, but my captain was furious. He accused me of showing off and threatened to suspend me. This ended my football career, for by the next season I was on

another tack. By then, not only did I forswear the game, but for the rest of my life nothing could induce me to watch a match.

With the coming of spring, however, my athletic urge was still strong. Cricket was on the horizon and I saw myself a graceful, flannel-clad figure, part of the poetry of the game. To me batsmen were heroes, bowlers demigods. I dramatized myself in the part of a cricketer and confided to MacSporran my ambition. As a cricket fan he was pessimistic. "You will never make a batsman or a bowler. You are too anxious to do well to do well. However, I might get you into the second eleven. Let me see . . . you might specialize in some particular position. You are not smart enough for a wicket-keeper, and as an out-fielder you are too poor a thrower. How about mid-wicket? I might mould you into a mid-wicketeer."

MacSporran had a scientific approach to games. He believed that if, instead of being an all-round player, one could concentrate on a special phase, success might be achieved. He was interested in me because he wanted to prove his theory. Besides, he took a vicarious pleasure in any triumph I might achieve. A fervent lover of sport in which he could not take part because of his conky heart, he found in me a chance to express his frustrated wistfulness. For hours he made me practise short catching. He would throw the ball at me viciously from unexpected positions till he failed to take me by surprise. We practised in a small room till I was fairly expert. Soon I could snap up almost any stinger he handed me. Then he sent me to a practice game, telling me: "Concentrate. Stand as close to the batsman as possible. Watch every ball as it comes in and act as though you expect it to be batted to you. What's better still, *will* the batsman to play into your hands."

Having asked to play "mid," I hovered close to the wicket. I bent forward, tense, eager, holding my hands in readiness for the ball that I was sure was going to nestle in them. But most of all I willed the batsman to put it there. Perhaps there was something in my suggestion, for he frequently did. And as sure as it came near me I snapped it up. In my first match I made three catches, one of them so close to the ground that I got a cheer from the crowd. After that my position was assured, and I rarely failed to bring off at least two catches in every match. I simply willed the batsmen to play into my hands and the weaker ones did. Oh, I did not become a cricketer. My batting average was two not out, as I went in last man. But I did become a mid-wicketeer; thus proving MacSporran's theory that specialization will win out where all-round ability will get a man nowhere.

Thus, thanks to MacSporran, I maintained my self-respect on the

cricket ground. It was something to belong to the team, and I was particularly proud because I was not made for sport and I hated competitive games. But I got more joy from doing things for which I was not suited than from others which might bring me success with little effort. Even to-day I do not value a victory unless it is hardly won.

So for a year games were my dominating interest. During that time I read nothing but the sporting papers and with my chums would talk athletics by the hour. I followed the matches feverishly, knew the players by heart. My enthusiasm for all phases of sport was an obsession. The fate of nations might be in the balance; it weighed nothing with the victory of the Rangers over the Celts or the triumph of Lancashire over Yorkshire. And it did me good. It kept me much in the open air, made me objective and healthy in mind and body. Altogether, it was a rather radiant year. . . .

Then suddenly I sickened of it all. I was saturated with sport to the point of nausea and I jettisoned my experience with never a qualm. It was as if I had been possessed by a fire that burned itself out by its own intensity. Of course, I let MacSporran down badly, and for a time I avoided him. But soon after he consoled himself, for he switched from sport—to politics. He became a flowery orator and ended up in Parliament as a silent member for a Gaelic constituency.

## Chapter Five

### WOULD-BE THESPIAN

PHYSICALLY and morally my sporting year did me a heap of good. It toughened my fibre, built up my confidence. No longer was I a shy, sensitive youth, sending secret verse to the local rags. I now thought myself a man about town, able to swagger into a pub and down a pint of beer with the best. And it was by way of the bar-room and the music-hall I continued my education. One night in the gallery of a variety palace a voice hailed me. It was Tommy Twitchell, my old football captain. I had not met him since he had bawled me out for scoring a touch-down from full-back. He had always been stand-offish with me. Now, however, he seemed glad to see me.

"Hullo, young fellow! what are you doing in this den of iniquity?"

"Sad as it may seem, I like it," I said. "I'm afraid I have a talent for low living. But what about you?"

"Oh, I'm studying to be a music-hall artist. I want to go on the halls."

I was surprised; but now I remembered he had often entertained us on train trips when we were playing out-of-town matches. As we walked home he stopped me under a lamp-post. "I've got a new song. It's called *King of the Kurds*. How is this?"

I only remember a snatch of the chorus, which went:

It may seem absurd, for I am not a Kurd,  
But I'm king of 'em all the same,  
Ta-ra-ra . . .

He then strutted in a ring, tilting his hat on one side and sticking out his bottom in the classic way. I was deeply impressed.

"Bravo," I said. "You only want a step-dance to top it off."

"How is this?" he asked, and tapped a little dance. I was still more impressed. Then he gave me imitations of Dan Leno and Little Tich. He could twist his face grotesquely and do things with his voice. I was enthusiastic in my admiration. "You should really be a professional," I told him.

"I'm terribly keen. But the old man would disown me if I did.



He's a deacon and a draper. He wants me to go into the shop." For at that time the music-hall had not attained the dignity of vaudeville. It had produced few great artists. Yet once at the tail-end of a show I saw a turn that impressed me. We were leaving our seats to go home, but we stayed to encore and applaud. Yet as I saw the name on the programme in insignificant letters it meant nothing to me. I read: *Harry Lauder, Scotch Comedian*. . . .

With Tommy I spent my sixpences in music-halls. I loved the unexpectedness of the show, its rich vulgarity. It went with lager beer, pork pies and shag tobacco. We cheered Vesta Tilley and Marie Loftus and joined in their choruses. I fancy I owe something to my early education in vaudeville. It's rum-tum, rumtittytum inspired some of my verses, and when I played at song-composing it was in the tempo of the old-fashioned music-hall.

I kept urging Tommy to take a chance and become a pro. I am sure he would have had a success, for as an amateur he made a big hit. But he never could muster up courage to take the plunge. He had not that touch of the devil which even I, his meek satellite, possessed. He was intensely popular; I was proud of his patronage, but I deplored his lack of daring. So in the end he succumbed to respectability. Last time I saw him he was wielding a yard-stick and on the fairway to successful mediocrity. But O the glorious adventure he missed! . . .

There was another lad whom I must add to my list of frustrated souls. One night I thought I would give the theatre a break, and from the front of the gallery I was enjoying an operetta called *Marjorie*. Suddenly I was aware of a boy at my side who was watching the show with an intent and hungry look. He had a puny body, and a large head, set askew on his neck. At the end of the act I asked him:

"Don't you live in Ferndale Terrace?"

"Yes. You live in Roselea. I've seen you passing our house. Do you go much to the theatre?"

"No, I'm more of a music-hall man."

"Oh, I go to the music-hall too. I admire Albert Chevalier. I saw him in London recently. If you care to come to our house sometime, I'll play and sing some of his songs."

That was the beginning of a brief but bright friendship. His name was Horace Pewgrass and he lived with his mother. But he had the theatre in his blood, and I never knew a boy so keen to get on the boards. Unlike Tommy, he would have chuckled the best job to go on the stage. It was his love, his life. It was his tragedy too, for he had the heart of a romantic lead and the body of a buffoon. At the piano he was a good entertainer of the Grossmith

type; but he looked pathetic with his heavy head awry on his twisted neck. He was like a grotesque gnome, and his voice was a penetrating croak.

I spent many happy hours with Horace. He had a keen sense of acting and would point out fine things. We spent magic hours watching Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, Wyndham, Willard and other great actors. Afterwards we would talk excitedly: "Did you mark her voice where . . ." Or "Did you see his business when . . ." And so on, all the way home.

Then we would go to a pub frequented by actors, and drink beer, looking with admiration at the professionals. How proud was I to buy a drink for a slim youth who played a footman in a current comedy. The fact that he subsequently rose to fame justifies my hero-worship.

But even more than London stars we loved our provincial players, because we felt they belonged to us. There were two comedians, fat J. T. Toole and meagre Edward Terry, who gave me unfailing delight. Then Edward Compton, with his old English comedies, was eagerly welcomed. But to my mind best of all was a stalwart Shakespearian actor called Osmond Tearle. He had a rolling voice and a way of declaiming blank verse that I do not think was ever equalled. It was like organ music. I loved Tearle. I saw him time after time, and tried to echo his mournful cadence. In doing so I lowered the pitch of my own voice till I was speaking in chesty tones instead of throaty ones.

Then suddenly I became stage-struck. I got out Hamlet and Macbeth and declaimed them as I had done in the grove with Pat so many years ago. I ignored the sense of the lines; the sound was what I was after. I intoned the blank verse sonorously. Poetry seemed now to be only a medium to exploit my voice. And in front of my bedroom mirror I grimaced, spouted and postured.

"I want to do the Bard," I told Horace. "I'll study, and maybe Vezin or Bently might give me a chance. Oh, I'm willing to begin at the bottom. Rosenkrantz or even Guildenstern. . . ." He was sympathetic but not enthusiastic. Shakespeare bored him, and on nights I went to the legit he patronized a modern comedy. He realized that I had neither the height nor the lungs for Shakespeare, and I knew he could never play the dashing parts he aspired to; but we "kidded" each other on. So hoping and dreaming we lived in a magic world of our own.

Ah! these were the great days when we saw ourselves members of THE profession. As we emerged from the pub we tried to look like the mummers we had been rubbing shoulders with. We imagined that the passers-by thought we were actors too. We affected Thespian airs and talked in loud tones of the boards and rehearsals. We

bought the *Era* and read it conspicuously in tram-cars. Innocent vanity! Vain pretence! But, oh, what joy it gave us. . . .

I took a class in elocution at the Athenæum, because it was conducted by an old actor who had once played with Wilson Barrett. But it was too elementary, and after a few lessons I abandoned it. However, I happened to enter the building one evening when the examination was in progress. On the spur of the moment I walked into the room and gave them Browning's *Pied Piper*. I had just got as far as an imitation of the rage of the burgomaster when the examiners stopped me. "Surely I have made a fool of myself," I said, dismissing the matter from my mind. Then a few days later I saw my name heading the list. The result of this was to start me on a fell career as an elocutionist. I got up pieces such as *Lasca*, *Fra Giacomo*, *Shamus O'Brien* and *The Spanish Mother*. I did nothing but dramatic stuff and I loved to let myself go. I became in demand for church-halls and beer-halls, and soon I was launched as an entertainer. I can see now how learning by heart and reciting dramatic pieces had an effect on my future verse. I must confess that I often write with an eye to the reciter.

One day Horace came to me. "I've got an engagement."

"Splendid. Juvenile lead?"

"No, pantomime. They are doing a burlesque of *East Lynne*. They want me to play Little Willie."

I paid a bob to see him. He was wheeled on in a baby carriage, wearing a blond wig and frilled pantalettes. A sorry affair. I avoided him after that, feeling I could not offer him my congratulations. I think it was the only appearance he ever made; for soon after he caught cold standing in the wings and became a lunger. Poor chap! He died in his early twenties. No one wanted a romantic lead with a twisted neck. Like myself, he had his bright dreams, but Fate had stacked the cards against him.

Like Horace, I did much hanging round the theatre. Occasionally I got a job as an extra, but the professional supers resented me, and I had to propitiate them with beer and cigarettes. They were a seedy lot, earning a shilling a night. I carried a banner in a revival of *Marmion*, and I played second watchman in *Macbeth*. But my first engagement was in a big production of *Rob Roy*. Then, for the only time in my life, I saw my name on a theatrical bill. It was last in the long cast, and in the smallest of type I read: *Robert, son of Rob Roy*, then my name. I gazed at the poster, hoping that others would join me in my rapturous contemplation. I wanted to point: "That's me." But the world passed by unheeding, so somewhat sobered, I sought the theatre.

The stage-door man barred my way. "In the cast," I told him loftily, and with a suspicious look he admitted me. Thereupon I found my way to the stage where a rehearsal was going on. As no one paid any attention to me I took a seat in the stalls, feeling happy that at last I had attained my beloved world of make-believe. My part was small but effective. I had to run on, panting and panicky, to announce the capture of Rob Roy. My mother, Helen MacGregor, grabbed me and cried: "Where's yuh fathah?"

"A prisoner of the Sassenach," I said brokenly. In an impulse of wrath, she threw me on my back. I twisted round, ducked my head and quivered my shoulders with a simulation of grief. Helen then indulged in a fierce tirade, ending up: "They have not yet subdued Rob Roy." As she finished, with a flourish of her claymore, she saw me prostrate at her feet. Then she grabbed me up again and clutched me to her capacious bosom; after which she proceeded to shed tears down my neck. And strange though it may seem, this scene was most effective; for in those days "ham" acting was taken seriously. So I felt that, though I had no illusion as to its banality, I must not let my mother down. Maybe we might be worthy of a curtain call. . . .

Came the opening night. I had a beautiful Highland costume, a red wig and a Balmoral bonnet. As I gazed into the cracked mirror I scarcely knew myself. Stunning, I thought. Then the actor who played Baillie Nicol Jarvie suggested that what I needed was a good bracer of Scotch, so we sought the bar together.

I was having a "wee one" when Hamish, my brother in the cast, came running to tell me that Helen, my mother, was frantic about me. "The old girl's up in the air. I didn't know she was a rabid teetotaler. She says: 'Where's my boy?' And when I said: 'At the bar,' she shrieked: 'My Robert drinking! Oh, the young rascal! Fetch him to me at once. I'll give him such a spanking.'"


"She wull too," said the Baillie. "She'll lift yer kilt and skelp ye." Then he twisted my sporran round till it protected my rear. "There! that'll tak' aff the brunt o' it."

So we had another drink, and we were putting it back when the call-boy came running: "Your entrance," he yelled. I made a dash for the stage. I arrived just in time for my entry, but as I emerged from the wings I heard an anguished howl from the stage manager: "For God's sake stop him! He's got his kilt on backward."

With a shock I realized that my sporran was dangling behind instead of in front; but it was too late. There, in the middle of the stage, I heard a twitter from the front rows, then a rumble of laughter as the house realized my plight. Helen was gazing at me with horror. Then she threw me to the ground with vicious force.

As I lay I struggled to adjust my kilt, but in my efforts I felt that something had slipped and the whole thing was coming down. As she yanked me up again I felt my kilt dropping to my ankles, but with a swift movement she happed me round in her voluminous plaid. Then, as she sobbed over me: "My son, my precious boy!" she hissed: "You little devil! I'll flay you for this. . . ." But as the curtain fell to mingled applause and laughter, I ducked under her arm and fled the scene.

So ended my one and only appearance on the professional stage. I was mortified, and my love of the theatre died right there. No, I must not say that. It has never died. To-day the lure of the foot-lights is as strong as ever. In any case, the world has been a stage for me, and I have played the parts my imagination conceived. Rarely have I confronted reality. Now at seventy it seems as if I had never lived at all—just dreamed and played at living. . . .



## Chapter Six

### COLLEGE CAREER

THE theatre having cast me out, I returned to literature for comfort. However, this time it was prose that interested me. I read the essayists from Addison to Hazlitt, and the purple patches of De Quincey. But to me it was dead stuff, like tapestry and old lace. I have always disliked word-spinning. Better to say a fine thing poorly than to say a poor thing finely. I distrust adornment and seek simplicity of expression. The person behind the writing is more to me than his screen of words. I admire men of rich activities and hold book-men in small esteem.

It was this prepossession then that attracted me to the two writers who have most influenced my life. They came like apostles of light and leading. It was as if they had a special message for me and we were spiritually akin. Other writers have affected me. Stevenson, Kipling, Jack London, have inspired me, but it remained for these two to bring me a feeling of self-revelation and to some extent to change the pattern of my life. The first of these was Thoreau. By some instinct I knew from the first page of *Walden* that here was my meat. Here was a clean new world of tonic air and diamond clarity. Here was a man who thought for himself and whose ideas curiously coincided with my own. I, too, wanted to live in ultimate simplicity, and by solitary communion with nature to realize my spiritual self. Perhaps what I really wanted was to be lazy and shirk hard labour, but at the time it seemed to me I would like to be a recluse philosopher.

So I dallied with the idea that I would save a few hundred pounds and seek the sanctuary of the wilderness. To me Thoreau was like a spring gush of joy and sunshine. He meant escape, self-expression, freedom. And I have never gotten over this idea of escape. Little islands tempt me, and the hearts of cities offer me aloneness. As far as I decently could I have isolated my life, trying to achieve spiritual integrity. For I hold that it is not what we make with our hands and brains that matters, but what we make with ourselves. . . .

And now to the second of the writers that made a minor revolu-

tion in my young life. One day I picked up a faded volume in an old book-store. Immediately my attention was riveted. It was narrative, but written in such a simple, direct, yet picturesque style I was instantly captivated. It was as clear and lucid as a morn in spring. It achieved style by an unconsciousness of style and took colour from the atmosphere it described. I had that thrill of discovery and recognition one rarely gets from an author. Here was a man long dead who had so much of myself in him he might have been a blood ancestor. I devoured the book greedily. I told my friends about it, but could not convert them to my enthusiasm. Indeed, I have never been able to gain disciples for this man, and now he is almost forgotten. To-day I am surprised at my infatuation, but my explanation is that he arrived at a moment in my life when I most needed someone like him. To get supreme pleasure from an author one must collaborate with him. It is this affinity of taste and sympathy that makes the perfect reader. Both must give.

But I had better reveal the name of this writer who put such a spell on me. He was a great and original character to whom book-making was a means and not an end; a fine, handsome man, a fighter and lover of horses, a friend of gipsies, a rover and a student. His name was Borrow and his book was *Lavengro*.

I know now why he gripped me. It was because he had the Romany heart, loving before all else animals, nature and freedom. He called with clarion appeal, and I responded with the eagerness of a fellow-vagabond. I vowed I would become another *Lavengro*. I dreamed of a caravan, a snared rabbit and the crackle of thorns under the pot. He revealed to me the gift of vagrancy. He was one of the unsettling urges that made me a lover of the open road.

To these two I owe more than all the professors I ever had. . . . Thoreau, you fostered the recluse in me; Borrow, you kindled the wanderlust. I bless you both, for I have no reason to regret either.

But talking of professors brings me to the subject of this chapter, my student year. As I made my daily walk through the park with its winding river, the serene beauty of the University held my eyes. High soaring from the hill, I admired its dignity and envied those who could loiter in its cloisters. Then the idea came to me—why not be one of them? I visioned myself in cap and gown; I felt the grace of learning fall upon me. So I matriculated and joined classes. Because of my bank work there were only two that I could follow, one in moral philosophy at eight in the morning, the other in literature at half-past four in the afternoon. I soon gave up the first. Bacon, so soon after my morning rasher, was difficult to digest; besides, I rather resented the moral qualification of philosophy. But I stuck to the literature class till my final act of rebellion.

There were about two hundred of us in a class-room where the desks ranged tier above tier. The professor had a pale, bearded face, a suave voice and an absent manner. He read his lectures with an Oxford aloofness. I don't think he took much interest in his little beasts of students. They were a grubby lot anyway, mostly gawky lads from the country, with pimply, whiff-whiskered faces and shabby-ill-fitting clothes. Their parents had saved and scrimped to send their sons here, with the manse as the ultimate goal. They knew nothing of the city, except the road from their lodgings to the University. They did not want to know any more. To me, city-wise, they were poor boobs to be pitied and disdained. Could I not enter a pub, order a bitter and chaff the barmaid? Compared with them I was smeared with sophistication. Of all that class I think I was the only one who had looked on life through the beery haze of a bar parlour.

In front of me was a remarkable fellow called Tevendale. He was tall, with tight-fitting clothes that showed his muscular figure. He had a grim face and regular features. But most striking was his high-domed head, almost twice the size of an ordinary head, and bulging at the temples. He never spoke to anyone, entering morosely and leaving silently at the end of the lecture. It seemed as if he despised us. In all his classes he stood first. During the lecture he bent over a notebook, writing rapidly with a pen. He never paused, never looked to right or left. He fascinated me so, I would fall to watching him instead of listening to the professor.

Two other students attracted me. One was a wizened little fellow from a law office who took down the lectures in shorthand. The third had a dark, beautiful face and was the class poet. At Christmas, when we were asked to try for the poetry prize, he was the only one to make an effort. The subject was *Inspiration*; but for me, who disliked rhetoric, it had no appeal. My inspiration was always material and I was happiest close to earth.

I mention these three because in the examination before Christmas they came first, second and third. The fourth was myself. No one was more surprised than I. Out of a class of two hundred, to stand so high seemed wonderful . . . till I realized that my triumph was one of stupidity. It was like this. . . . I used to take down in abbreviated longhand the professor's lectures, and when I got home I would copy them into a notebook. I would read this again and again, till I had the stuff almost by heart. Imagine, then, my delighted amazement when I sat down to my exam to find that all the questions were based on the lectures and that my notes formed a direct answer. I romped through the paper, giving the replies in the professor's own words. That I came fourth was putting a premium on lack of originality.



In my first class essay I followed the same copy-cat methods and came out fifth. The subject was *Was Hamlet Mad?* and I followed the lead of the class textbook in my answer. The commentary was: "A thoughtful, interesting and well-written paper." But I was not pleased. I felt like a prize parrot.

Christmas came with its holidays. I haunted the corridors and closes of the University, preening myself on my success. I loved the big quadrangle with the ivy-clad homes of the Professors around it. I read famous names on brass plates—Kelvin, Jebb, Ramsey, Drummond, the Cairds. As I capped to them they would nod. But I felt a fraud. I was not a real student, just a one-class man, and soon I was to cease that. . . .

My first evening in class I noticed a face vaguely familiar. I went up to the lad, who was better dressed than those about him.

"Are you not Tammie McCurdie?"

He gave me a hostile stare: "Yes, but I don't seem to know you."

I did not remind him of the famous fight, but I told him my name.

"Indeed," he said, looking at me with obvious distaste. "You've changed."

"You haven't. I should have known you anywhere." He did not like the way I said it. After a pause he said awkwardly: "Well, I must be going."

He went away with his friends, and next time I saw him he cut me. I could have slapped his face, but I thought: "Poor chump! You're not worth bothering about." When my class standing was high he tried to make up to me, but I looked through him. He was intended for the ministry and his parents gave him more money than most of his fellows. One day I met him with a girl. It was very rare to see a student with a girl, so I stared hard. He got very red and looked the other way.

After Christmas things did not go so well. We had to study Chaucer, and from the beginning I could not stick the stuff. I loathed his outlandish dialect and I thought he wrote rhymed doggerel. Youthful prejudice, no doubt, but I gave up in disgust. So when the next exam came round I did not sit. Then came the second series of essays. The subject was the character of Ophelia. But by this time I was beginning to revolt against University tradition. I resented its narrow academic atmosphere. In our class anything modern was anathema. No writer was supposed to exist beyond the Victorian era. The dogmatism that prevailed antagonized me, yet the country boys swallowed the class dictums like gospel truths. Who among them, I wondered, had read George Moore, Zangwill, Kipling, Barrie, Henley and the *Yellow Book*? I was inclined to be in the advance

guard of the literary movement, while the professors and their class following were still stuck in the Victorian mud. To them slang was unthinkable, and the new writers were cocky upstarts.

Specially obnoxious to me was the professor's assistant. He was a son of the manse, being groomed for the ministry. To him literature meant classic literature, and he gave lectures full of grandiloquent phrases. I remember a paper he read on the Heroines of Shakespeare. It finished up: "They should be ensainted for ever in the high heaven of divine poetry." This peroration brought the applause of the class, but one listener murmured: "Bunk."

In my essay on *Ophelia* I thought I would be different. Anyone can be right, but few can be original. So I ventured to suggest that she was a bit of a slut and that this was partly responsible for Hamlet's distracted state of mind. I tried to prove my point by quotations from the text, and imagined that at least there was something to be said for it. Above all, it was the best bit of writing I had done, dashing, aggressive and confident. Here, said I, is an essay that will be marked ninety per cent. . . . The time came when we got our themes back. Anticipative of triumph, I received mine eagerly. What was this? Twenty-three marks! There must be some mistake. . . . No, I turned over the pages. They were scored with blue pencilling from end to end. Every line was subjected to the same bitter censure. And at the end I read: "A perverse and obscene bit of work—unworthy of a student of this class."

Anger succeeded amazement. It was a cold rage that seemed to suffocate me. All through the class I boiled and fumed till I could hardly contain myself. I could scarcely wait till the students had gone. The youthful assistant was still at his desk arranging his papers. I went up to him, trembling with a fury beyond control.

"Did you correct this?" I said in a choked voice. He took it from me, glanced over it, threw it back contemptuously.

"I think I did. What about it?"

"It's unfair and prejudiced, and I protest."

He looked at me in surprise. He was a pompous chap. "The Professor concurs with me in my markings of the essays," he said, with a sneer. Then he went back to arranging his papers, indicating the matter was closed. But I said: "I think you're a liar and a silly ass as well."

He sat up as if shocked. Then he got white and pointed to the door. "Leave this room, sir. And I'll see you never re-enter it."

I said: "I'll go when it jolly well suits me. Would you like to eject me? Come and try."

"I will report you to the Faculty. You will be expelled."

"Come and expel me now. Are you a coward as well as a liar and

a fool? Why don't you put off that gown and wear petticoats? They would suit you better."

"I wish for no unseemly wrangle here," he said.

"Anywhere you like, then."

He bent down, fumbling over his papers. I snatched them up and flung them in his face. He said: "This is an outrage. It is unprecedented . . ."

"All right," I said, "you are a coward and a dirty dog. I won't enter your class-room again. I'm not one of these fools that swallow all you say. But I'm a private student, I have paid my fee and I doubt if you could keep me out of the class. We are man to man, and I tell you that if ever I meet you outside I will pull your nose and kick your professorial bottom." With that I walked away, but at the door I turned for a last broadside. "Rotten funk!" I shouted. "You're no more than a *greasy gob in a fishwife's spittle*."

So ended my college career. No more could I see myself as a scholar, living in a sheltered world of books. I did not want to. Then as I walked home my fury died and I was strangely happy. A great load had been lifted from me. Now I realized how hard I had been driving myself, poring over my notes every spare moment, reading up authorities. How often had I studied under a whining gas-jet until the early hours of the morning! How often gone to bed with eyes smarting and head seething! No, I had not enjoyed this last year. . . .

Well, that was another chapter finished. I tore up my notes and chucked my class books into a cupboard. Stopford Brooke, Nichols, Taine—to hell with them! Let others swat them up. I was finished for good. And that night I celebrated my freedom by getting mildly plastered in a low-down pub.

## Chapter Seven

### PROLETARIAN PRIG

BACK to dear old slum-land with its dockers, its derelicts and its dreams. No more ivied colleges with their crusty culture. To the devil with book-learning and study. I would learn from human nature and study in the university of life.

I have always thought the slums of a city more interesting than its show places. Its shame is more significant than its pride. I once thought of writing a book on the slums of Europe; but alas! it would take two lives to do all one plans. For poignant misery the slums of our city would bear comparison with any; but it was the cheerful aspect I tried to see, that of fried-chip shops and beery taverns. At that time there was a spate of slum-land literature, and writers such as Arthur Morrison, Zangwill and Neil Lyons were exploiting the seamy side of city life. I was attracted by the drama of social distress, the soil of human passion manured by misery. But where others saw pathos I saw humour, and the material for stories lay about me in rich variety.

I was happy because I had escaped the coils of stale scholarship, so I followed my dreamful bent awaiting the next obsession. It came soon. One day I bought a slim book called *Merrie England*. It was written by an ex-soldier called Robert Blatchford, and was, I think, the best book on socialism ever published. It was so appealing, so crystal clear, so reasonable, it made me a convert over night. I began it with scepticism and prejudice; I finished with conviction and enthusiasm.

Yet if you asked me to-day if I were a socialist I should probably say I was a radical with socialist sympathies. I am too cowardly to go all the way, too indifferent to profess decided opinions. But in those days I was a rabid revolutionist. Socialism was a religion to me. I read every book I could find on the subject. I subscribed to the *Clarion*, went to meetings and tried to interest others. I became, in short, a bore and a nuisance. For at eighteen, or perhaps even eighty, one has no right to force one's ideas on others, whether they be of health, religion or social science. At that age I was an over-serious prig, with little sense of proportion. Life was ardent, purposive. The woes of humanity lay heavy on me. I imagined I had a mission to

alleviate them. I saw myself a fiery orator, inflaming the passions of the mob, carrying a red banner as I stormed a barricade. I cursed the capitalists. I was one of the have-nots, hating the haves. In short, I was an egregious young ass.

I did not make a single convert. Even the hopelessly poor, who should have been the most interested in their only hope for liberation, were more excited over football. As for those in my own class, the subject simply bored them. They laughed or yawned or were arrogantly superior. It was:

"All right, old chap, have it your own way."

Or: "Sorry, but I'm really not interested."

Or: "Sheer piffle; selfishness will always be the mainspring of human nature."

I was rebuffed into the awareness that I was looked on as a crackpot and that people were avoiding me. But it was when I began to meet fellow-workers for the cause that I began to wilt. Socialism would be charming, I thought, if one could eliminate the socialist. I have always found that my own ideas antagonize me when they are held by others; so I now found fellow-socialists antipathetic to me. Their manners grated on me. They had one-track minds. Often they were narrow, ignorant and bigoted. They spouted the same old clap-trap. They allowed their leaders to think for them. I began to doubt their intelligence, then their sincerity. I got so sick of hearing the stock platitudes—the exploitation of labour, the profit motive in industry, a classless society. Because I was well dressed I was looked on with suspicion. I should have worn a cloth cap and a flannel shirt. Obviously I was not of the proletariat. As to its dictatorship, it dawned on me that I did not want any kind of dictatorship. I wanted to be free.

To-day I find it pleasant to be a carpet-slipper socialist, but to live in comfortable security on one's unearned increment. I admit that interest and inheritance may be wrong, but I profit by both. With my reasoning mind I accept the logic of socialism, but my selfish human nature keeps me from doing anything to further it. By nature I am indolent, dreamy and peace-loving. I have never cast a vote. I have avoided public life. I live abroad to escape responsibilities. In short, I am a very bad citizen indeed.

One day, while I was still passionately proletarian, I had a queer experience, which came to me as a shock and a warning. Our bank bordered on slum-land and our Manager was also Registrar for the district. His office adjoined the bank; in fact, his private room connected the two. From time to time couples came to get married in a hurry. The papers would be made out in the Registrar's office, and he would send the pair to the town hall, where the Sheriff would

perform the ceremony. But a clerk had to go with them to see that they really did go through with it. Sometimes, when the Registrar's assistant was too busy, I would be asked to play guide to the half-weds and pilot them through the final act. I would witness the ceremony, take charge of the papers, and receive a fee of half-a-crown.

Half-crowns were precious in those times and I was mighty glad to earn one for so pleasant an office. Well, one day I was called on to perform this duty. I joined the pair and the mother of the bride in a waiting cab. She was rather a bold-faced girl; the mother was sharp-featured and shrewish; the bridegroom, to my amazement, was . . . Tammie McCurdie. I had not seen him since my University days, and he recognized me with chagrin and shame. The girl was bent out like a bow in front. Tammie had certainly done a good job. I was afraid she might have a baby before we got through the business on hand. The bride looked beaming, the mother masterful, Tammie the picture of misery. In a sheepish whisper he said to me: "I've gone and made a bloody fool of myself." That seemed fairly obvious, and though he had been beastly to me I felt sorry for him. It was the old story of the landlady's daughter. He had gone just a little too far, and he was nailed for life. As he stood before the Sheriff he looked more like a youth being sentenced to death than to holy matrimony.

"Take your hands out of your pockets when you're being married," said the Sheriff sharply, and Tammie withdrew them. Then the hard-faced mother, looking chirpy, handed him the wedding ring she had bought, and the Sheriff told him to put it on the finger of the smirking bride.

As we came away he whispered again: "Father and mother made me do it. Said they would disown me if I didn't. I'm in the soup."

"What will you do now?" I asked anxiously. You would have thought we were brothers just then. I liked this new Tammie, the reckless seducer. I almost admired him.

"Dunno. I think I'll join up. The Gordons, maybe. Wish there was a bloody war on. Oh, blast and damn. . . ." Then he added in a tragic whisper: "If its eyes are not blue, there will be hell to pay. You know what I mean. That Indian bastard, my fellow lodger . . ." I wished him luck, but I fear it availed him little. What his ultimate fate was I do not know.

Another little vignette pertains to those days. I was wilting in my adhesion to socialism when one evening I sought my favourite pub. I wanted to thrash out my social problem. Maybe I was wrong; but better to think wrongly than not to think at all. Or maybe I was wrong in that too. It was very perplexing. I ordered a light lager

and lit my pipe. I paid little attention to the drunken bloke at the next table, till his shabby bowler fell off; so I picked it up, brushed it and set it before him. Then I saw who he was and I had a bit of a shock. . . .

A girl came over and sat by him. She was small, blonde and pretty. She tried to rouse him, but roughly he brushed her away. "Leave me alone, ye wee hizzy. I've no use for you to-night." Then suddenly he opened his eyes and saw me. He stared a moment, straightened up, then addressed me nastily: "Your face, sir, is obnoxiously familiar. In what antechamber of Hades have we met?"

"Are you not Tevendale," I said. "The star student of the University?"

"The professor's pride. And here I snooze and booze. But where do you come in?"

"I don't. I dropped out. Too much fruity tradition."

"You're bloody well right. Those old fogies with moss on their backs, stuffing their mouldy opinions down our throats. Doctrines and dogmas. Exams based on them. If you don't pass you don't get your degree and you are dished. Making morons of us all. Say, what do you think of it, Nellie?"

He pinched her cheek. I could see she adored him. I said: "You didn't distinguish yourself by stupidity."

"That's just what I did do. You see I'm cursed with a marvellous memory. I have difficulty in forgetting. That's the hell of it. My brain is stored with useless lumber. Such as professorial lectures. Nothing easier than to reproduce them. In examinations, turn a crank and you have the answers. That's what I am, a memory man. Buy me a drink." He had a whisky and Nellie a sherry. He drank carelessly. He was half soused, but there was no weakness in his face, only bitter strength. He went on:

"This is the real life—wine, women, song. Let scholars stick to their mouldy libraries. Give me the man that dares to live. Better let Nellie here make a pimp of me than be a barnacled professor in some smug hall of learning. Better to go down to the gutter like Villon and Verlaine. Do you know French literature—Baudelaire, Huysmans, Mallarmé? You should. There's a people who know how to live, because they know how to reconcile the flesh and the spirit."

I was surprised to hear him talk thus. He might call himself a "memory man," but I had never met anyone so original. As he sat for a while in brooding thought, I watched him admiringly. Though he was only some three years older than I, I felt as if he was my senior by a score. With his top-heavy head and his long sinewy frame, he was a dominating personality. His fine features were stamped with bitterness as he went on: "Last summer, with a useful bit of brass in my pocket, I went on a drinking tour in France.

On the shores of the Mediterranean I rested awhile. There, where the sea is eternally blue and the sun shines the year long, the people are gay and laugh and sing and love. . . . Well, I would like to go back there and be as one of them. I would live in a little red cottage, wear a *béret* and wine-coloured overalls and rope-soled sandals. I would be like a peasant with a boat and a net and a bit of land. I would grow purple cabbage and tomatoes and onions and garlic and red peppers. I would live with a dark, passionate Dago girl and eat mountains of spaghetti; and I would write a book on the success of failure."

He downed his whisky at a gulp. "Let me tell you something. . . . That's just a dream. I'll never do that. I'll be a stodgy professor and prime students with useless knowledge. I'll be a doctor of letters and maybe dean of my college. But I'll still write my book, only it will be on the failure of success. And I'll think of the days when I went to bed with a big bottle and a wee blonde. Those were the best. . . . Come on, Nellie, you little bitch, we'll go and wallow in the mire." He rose very abruptly, and without a word he put his arm round the girl's neck and stalked unsteadily away. As I sat there brooding over my beer I wondered what would become of him. Two men fought in him. Which would eventually conquer?



## *Chapter Eight*

### *BOHEMIAN INTERLUDE*

I HAD dramatized myself as a champion of the underdog, and found he was more interested in alcohol than in Utopia. So my sympathy with the proletariat languished, till finally I felt sick at the sight of a red flag. I did not lose my belief in socialism; it simply bored me. To-day, more than ever, I believe in its justice; but it bores me more than ever. Obviously I am not of reformer stuff.

My old chums were happy to find me normal again. My socialistic saturation had estranged us. A boy with a bee in his bonnet is a worse abomination than a grown-up crank. Gladly they received me into the fold. With two exceptions they were quite ordinary chaps. The first of these was Silverman. He was an analytical chemist and an agnostic. He read Darwin, Huxley, Ingersoll. His only belief was in unbelief. He converted me to materialism; and, of course, in my enthusiasm I had to overdo it. I studied rationalism till I became a bore. I assumed that because free-thinking interested me, it must interest others. I had yet to learn that irreligion can be as tiresome as religion. . . .

Silverman was a handsome fellow, with glossy black hair and velvety brown eyes. A clever, colourless face with a hint of calculation. He smoked cigarettes where we puffed pipes, but while we were utterly bohemian he had society tendencies. He had a fine figure and was inclined to dress well. I liked him very much, and he made a good agnostic of me.

Mugson, the second of my friends, was an extraordinary fellow, who, if he had lived, would have attained fame. He was a bantam with a head like Cæsar's. He spiked his moustache to pin-points, and kept his hair cropped to the roots. He rarely had his pipe out of his mouth, which was a cemetery of decayed teeth. His cheeks were a bright pink, his chin gun-metal blue. His voice was a squeaky drawl that made his least remark sound humorous. But he was witty in himself and made us laugh without effort. He was one of the few men who can be unfailingly funny. He had a comic spirit and a glib tongue. He knew our little idiosyncrasies and mocked them slyly. My peculiarity was that I would arrive, announcing that I

could only stay a minute—then remain till midnight. No doubt a lightning visit was my intention, but I was so eagerly voluble my tongue ran away with me. Later, I became morose. Now I am monosyllabic. How we change!

We were a gay gang. We joked and smoked. We never talked smut, yet we were mildly Rabelaisian. We seldom swore, with a thrifty Scotch belief that profanity is a gift of God that should not be squandered. Of the four-letter words that make up the vocabulary of vicious speech, we may have used an occasional "Damn" or "Hell"; but as to the other Anglo-Saxon terms, we did not foul our mouths with them.

We were a clean crowd, our talk mainly of sport, the theatre, business: rarely of books, on which subject I was considered an authority. My knowledge, however, was based on reviews, but they did not know that. I think one reason we were so decent was that we all had sisters, and insisted on a proper respect for the girls we knew. We may have known them but we never went with them. We were a band of cenobites. To have been seen "girling" would have disgraced us and proclaimed us "sissies." We cultivated a manly disdain for women, and though some of us hinted at secret adventures, I am sure we were all virginal. I think our contempt for the soft sex was a form of shyness. In my case it was. For years I scarcely spoke to a girl. I was afraid of them, and if by chance I met one I was self-conscious and tongue-tied.

Mugson was the unquestioned leader of our merry mob, and his ambition was to be a writer. His first success was an article for which I supplied the data. It was an account of a tour I made of Loch Lomond, in which I was nearly devoured by fleas in a navvy's doss-house. I considered it beneath me to write on such a subject; but gleefully he tackled it, making a very entertaining story, for which he was paid ten bob. Thus encouraged, he turned out stories and articles distinguished by humour and biting wit. He tried poetry too, but was not successful. What came so easily to me was laborious to him, and he wondered at my facility.

"If I could jingle rhymes like you," he said, "I wouldn't call the Laureate my uncle."

"Good job you can't," I told him. "Poetry doesn't pay. You'd probably end by selling matches in the gutter."

Mugson was a fellow with a sense of whimsy, while I was all for realism. He loved fairy tales, which I thought childish. He was enthusiastic about *Alice in Wonderland*, which I considered silly. We used to have frequent disputes. He would read me one of his stories.

"Hoots Mon!" I would say: "That's not a story at all. It has no beginning and no end. A story should have a plot and a climax."

He would answer: "It has character. It is a slice of life. What more do you want?"

"A story," I insisted, "should have story value—an arresting beginning and an exciting end."

"Bah! You are writing to please the public."

"Surely. The public pays and has a right to be pleased."

"You are a huckster. All you want is to collar the coin."

"Why not? I guess you could do with a bit yourself."

This was true, for at that time he was selling whisky demijohns to the pubs. Of course he was right as regards the public. But I was moron-minded in those days. I preferred to please the indiscriminating many rather than the select few. The trick is to do both. However, as regards realism versus fantasy, I have never wavered. I have always been naturalistic and hated mysticism.

But Mugson's genius lay in his humour, and his work was rich with it. He pegged away, making about a quid a week, till he got a serial into a weekly paper. It was called: *Tom, Dick and Harry*, and we were all in it. It was the forerunner of a school that was called the New Humour. Jerome, Barry Pain and Jacobs were its leading exponents, and the *Idler* and *To-day* its chief vehicles. If Mugson had lived he would have rivalled any of them. But in his twenties he had a stroke and became paralyzed. Even then he tried to carry on, still sending stories and sketches to the local papers; but his brain flagged, refusals became frequent and it was evident he was doomed.

In our limited circle I have known so many brilliant lads. Attracted to our cenacle there was a boy who had already published a book. It was a five-act tragedy, inspired by Ford and Massinger. The plot was based on incest, and in the end all the characters perished. He also wrote a sequence of sixty love sonnets, though I don't believe he had ever been familiar with a girl. I remember the opening line: "*I am a lazzarone in the lands of love. . .*" I thought his poem very beautiful. I often wondered what became of him. Probably he went to London and sank in the struggle.

One day I met my old school-mate, Jimmy. He was bubbling over as usual. He was writing a series of poems for *Quiz*. I said: "I used to write for *Quiz*."

"But they pay me," he said with dignity.

I felt squashed; but some months later I met him and I said: "I read your things in *Quiz*. I enjoyed them very much. Why have you stopped contributing?"

He said: "Oh, they did not pay me." Next time I saw him was twenty years later, when he was a big editor and a famous journalist.

We were indeed a gay gang, and the memory of our merriment

still is bright in me. We were all hard up, but full of hope. Without relaxing my iconoclastic studies, I went in for a course of French literature. I thought Daudet the perfect novelist, and *Sapho* a great book. I was attracted by the realism of Zola, then banned by the libraries. I read Flaubert, de Maupassant and the de Goncourts. I harked back to Balzac and Hugo. During an entire winter I read nothing but French books. George Moore was my guide. His *Confessions of a Young Man* was a literary landmark to me. He made me long to live in a Paris garret and emulate the heroes of Murger, which at a later date I did.

Another book of quite a different character had a great influence on me. It was *A Western Avernus* by Morley Roberts. It first kindled the spirit of vagabondage in me. I determined I would go to America and become a hobo. This, too, I ultimately achieved. What a happy year that was! My responsibilities were few, my cares less. I worked mechanically. I wanted to do as little as possible, but that little I did as well as possible. The mysteries of banking remained unrevealed to me and I had no desire to probe them. My original salary of twenty pounds remained at the same level, but it kept me in pocket-money. Already I was learning to follow the lovely line of least resistance.

Every evening we arrived at Mugson's, just as he was finishing his supper and lighting his first pipe. He always welcomed us and held forth amusingly on his day of demijohn peddling. He could make us all seem funny to each other. He was more ironic than satiric, but when he talked of books he was very serious. We had many arguments. I favoured French literature, then Russian, then American. I put English last; he put it first.

So we developed into a small club of about ten. One played the banjo; another sang; a third was a boxer, while a fourth painted quite nicely. We organized debates and got up sketches. We had sing-songs and entertainments. But our most triumphant expression was our magazine. We all contributed. It was typed and neatly bound and had a great success. I was represented by two triolets and a villanelle in which I aped Austin Dobson and Arthur Symonds. We all looked forward to the next number, when suddenly everything crashed and our whole community split and dissolved.

It came about this way. Mugson had a rich Uncle Archie who had married a lady evangelist. "Aunt Tibbie is so keen on saving souls," he told us, "she is positively dangerous. She regards every one of us as a prospect for her salvational lust; although she has not really saved Uncle Archie, as it would be detrimental to his business."

One day Silverman was invited to their house for a week-end. It was a nice villa in the country. Uncle Archie was a handsome elderly man, who played hymns on the banjo. He was so much in love with

Aunt Tibbie that at breakfast they ate out of the same egg. Silverman felt greatly honoured. He bought a new tail-coat, a shirt, tie and shoes. "He looked so disgustingly new he might have been a tailor's dummy," said Mugson. "And it set him back five quid. But then Uncle Archie has mining interests in Coolgardie, and an assayer's job might be in the offing."

When I saw Mugson a few days later he seemed upset. "What d'ye think!" he exploded. "Silverman's gone and got himself saved. Damn him, he's gone back on us all. Aunt Tibbie's seduced him, grabbed him and pulled him into the fold. She's a holy harpy."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Why, he's my sponsor for membership of the Rationalistic Society. He initiated me into free-thought. He can't let me down like this."

"He has. The dirty renegade! You go and have it out with him." I did. I found him in the laboratory of the college where he worked. He was arranging apparatus for the evening lecture. There was a seraphic expression on his face, an exalted look in his eyes. He was humming *Washed in the Blood of Jesus*.

"Don't tell me you've got it," I said.

"What?"

"Religion," I snarled.

He came and put his arm round my shoulders. "I have, and it's wonderful. *Wonderful*. I'm so happy."

"Oh, hell! What about me? You made me an unbeliever. Without you I wouldn't have cared a damn one way or the other. You converted me to agnosticism."

"And now I'm going to convert you to religion. Oh, you don't know what it means. I've been blind. Now I see the light . . . the Light."

"But what about science? Haeckel and Leibnitz and all that bunch you taught me to admire? What about Reason?"

"They are fools. Science means nothing. Reason means nothing. You can argue till you're black in the face. I tell you I know, *I know*, I KNOW."

He met all my protests with that smile of maddening superiority. He affirmed that matter was not substance but spirit. He was reborn. He was living on another plane. He began to sing a hymn. He had a rotten voice and sang out of tune and I watched him with growing disgust. I went on in a voice choked with righteous indignation: "You've got your nerve. Here you've landed me in a morass of materialism while you gaily spank a visionary tambourine and howl Hallelujah. I suppose you subscribe to this "turn the other cheek" stuff. If I handed you a sock on the jaw would you invite me to slug you on the other?"

He grinned cheerfully. "I don't know what my reactions might be.

"I wonder? Please try and see." He thrust out his jaw, but I declined the experiment. I remembered he was a boxer. I wasn't taking any chances with that guy.

"Well," I said bitterly, "you've let me down. I feel I just don't want to see you again."

"You won't have much chance. I'm going to Australia. Got a job as an assayer in a gold mine."

"Through Uncle Archie, I suppose?"

He disdained to answer, so I shrugged my shoulders and left him.

A week passed. One night I called on Mugson. I found him savagely chewing a steak and looking the picture of misery.

"What's biting you, old sport?" I asked.

"I've been converted," he answered bitterly. "That bunch of Christers got me down there last Sunday and gave me the works. They were seven against one. I stood out as long as I could, then after two hours of spiritual lambasting, I found myself down on my knees with the rest."

"How disgusting!"

"Yes, isn't it? Now, blast it, I'm saved. I've got the hope of a harp with the angels."

"Anything else you've got?"

"Yes, the promise of a job. Uncle Archie fixed it. No more demi-john peddling. I'm going to work for a firm of tobacco importers or exporters or something. Anyway, maybe I can have all the cigars I want."

"Of course you can. They would never muzzle the ass that treads the corn."

"You mean the 'ox,'" he objected.

"I think it's the ass, but let's look up the Bible."

He used to say it was the finest literature in the world, but now he shook his head. "No, since I've been converted the Bible doesn't appeal to me."

"I think you should give up smoking," I said. "I don't think the Apostles would have approved of it."

"I don't know. It hadn't been invented then. I can imagine old Peter sucking a corn-cob and John inhaling a gold-flake. Anyhow it's your turn. They mean to rope you in. I was told to invite you down on Sunday. You are to be Aunt Tibbie's next victim."

"I won't go."

"You're afraid. You can't take it."

"I can. I'm not a sap. Yes, by Gad, I'll go and I'll show you I'm more of a man than you."

The following Sunday morning, with my two friends as a body-

guard, I set out for the country seat of Uncle Archie. Silverman was shooting his cuffs and twiddling his tie. He was the only one of us who could wear a morning coat, Mugson being too short and I too fat.

"Isn't he disgustingly clean?" I remarked to Mugson.

"Repulsively immaculate," said Mugson, eyeing him with disfavour. He was far from his gay self. He gnawed his moustache and gazed at me grimly.

"You look like a lamb being led to the slaughter. It's not too late. You can get out at the next station and make a get-away." I was inclined to take his advice, but Silverman held me in an iron grip. "No, he's a brand to be snatched from the burning. We'll cheat the devil yet."

I felt depressed and apprehensive. A look at Aunt Tibbie, who met us at the station, did nothing to reassure me. She was a beautiful woman, wearing a poke-bonnet and a suit like the costume of the Salvation Army, but of fine cloth and impeccable cut. Who could resist such a lovely creature? She gave me a soulful, searching look and squeezed my hand fervently. Her face was exalted, her eyes magnetic. As we left the station I bought a copy of *Alley Sloper's Half Holiday*. It was the most idiotic paper I had ever read, and I felt it might give me moral support. As I saw the saintlike face of my hostess regarding me with spiritual yearning, I stuffed it guiltily into my pocket.

The day passed serenely, but I was aware of an increasing tempo of evangelistic fervour. They sang hymns and discussed the work of the mission, while I tried to appear politely interested. Fortunately there was a spaniel I could play with. Thank God, animals are not religious. We had a beautifully served dinner, after which Aunt Tibbie said: "Now let us go upstairs; we will have a little service of praise."

I said to Mugson: "My head is aching. I need a breath of fresh air. I'll join you later."

"All right," he whispered. "I'll pray for your protection." I felt he was on my side, so I went for a stroll in the grounds with the dog. Returning, I found a cosy fire burning in the drawing-room. I settled down before it and took out my *Alley Sloper*. But even as I read I felt strangely disquieted. It was as if a compelling force was drawing me upstairs to join the others. I had a feeling of mass suggestion, breaking down my will power. Would I, too, succumb? There were seven of them up there, all concentrating to draw me into the fold. And to fight them I concentrated on my imbecile of a paper. Every now and then Silverman would come down and look searchingly at me; then sadly at *Alley Sloper*. The penitent's bench was awaiting me, and yet I did not budge. Seven minds were bearing down on

mine. An uneasy sense of sin gripped me, and only the idiotic paper and the friendly dog saved me from an impulse to join them.

Once I heard Aunt Tibbie coming down, and I beat a hasty retreat to the lawn. It was a close shave. Through the french windows I could see her looking for me. If she had caught me just then I was sunk. When she had gone I slunk back, clutching my *Alley Sloper* like a shield and buckler. Twice Silverman came down, then Mugson.

"Stick it out, old top, you'll beat 'em yet," he whispered. Then I fell asleep and the next thing I remembered was him rousing me. "Aunt Tibbie came down for you after a most fervent appeal. We were all worked up to top pitch. We were sure we had you reduced to tears. And there you were snoring like a prize pig. Then she knew the jig was up and called off the meeting. She thinks you're a hard case—too fat to feel spiritual grace. I'm afraid she's going to be cold and distant when she meets you."

But she never did meet me. Next morning when we left she was too exhausted to say good-bye, and kept her bed. So did Uncle Archie, and I had a picture of him consoling her as they shared their morning egg.



## Chapter Nine

### BUCOLIC PHASE

IF the mountain will not go to Mahomet, Mahomet must come to the mountain." Mahomet was Mugson, standing on my doorstep with reproach in his eyes. I could not forgive him for going religious, so for three months I had avoided him. But now I stared at him with amazement. For he wore a fawn-coloured coat, with pearl buttons, and a brown derby, rakishly tilted on his bullet head. From under his spiked moustache jutted a big cigar. He looked like a racing tout. Who would have dreamed that he was a writer with the soul of a poet?

"Hullo," I said bitterly. "How's salvation?"

"I'm a backslider," he answered cheerfully. "It didn't go well with the tobacco trade, of which I am now an ornament. Pipes and piety don't click. But why this cruel neglect?"

"There are three reasons," I said mysteriously.

"You were always a crazy mug but you *are* interesting. Well, come along and have a beer in the first pub and you can tell Uncle all about it." Over our pints he looked at me quizzically. "Well, what new bee have you got in your bonnet?"

"First of all, I've joined the University gymnasium." He looked at my figure appraisingly. I had always suspected that the gang called me "Beefy" behind my back. No one would have dared to openly. I might be fat, but I was a fighter. I would have assaulted furiously anyone who ever hinted that my figure was on the plump side. A little chubby, perhaps, from too much chocolate eating; but fat . . . Oh, never! "Secondly," I went on, "I'm joining the Baths."

Here he grimaced. Never in human memory had Mugson been known to take a bath. Water was his pet aversion. Under his neatly creased trousers I knew his skinny shins were sheathed in grime. He believed that body dirt was protective, while open pores invited sickness. "Bathing is a pernicious habit," he said severely. "An Eskimo gets a bath just after he is born, then for the rest of his life not a drop of water touches his skin. Look at gipsies and French peasants. They never wash their busts and buttocks, yet they are healthier than you, who do it twice a day. . . . Well, what's your third announcement?"

It was so portentous I had been keeping it to the last. Deliberately

blowing the foam from my beer, I said: "It's just this—I'm leaving the ledger for the land. I'm quitting the bank. I'm going to be a farmer."

His eyes dilated with horror. "You're joking."

"Never was more serious in my life. I'm sick of bricks and mortar. Spring and the fields are calling. Back to the soil—that's my destiny. Why did I never realize it before?"

He studied me for a moment. "I see. Little Willie visions himself as a plaid-clad shepherd of the hills, as a Burns-like ploughman, as a scythe-swinging yeoman in a Hardy novel. His imagination is kindled. He would be a brawny being, full of valiant reliance."

"That's right. Think of the freedom of the farmer, his glorious health, his open-air life! There's romance in the soil as well as the sea. How you understand me!"

"Better than you do yourself, you silly ass. You're asking for trouble."

"I don't care. I don't want to stick in the same old rut. Life's an adventure and I mean to live. If I go down I'll go cheering."

"You're talking like the hero of one of these stories you're too lazy to write. You're dramatizing yourself."

"Not at all. I've had a revelation. What I am going to do is so absolutely right. I can't sleep at night thinking of it."

"You're a hot-headed fool. Look before you leap. The bank means security. It's a respectable job."

"That's just it. I don't want security. I scorn respectability. I want to be different from you fellows. You just write about things, but I mean to *do* them. I want escape, freedom, adventure."

"You're an incurable romanticist and a damn lunatic, but . . . well, maybe you're right."

I think, though, the real reason for my decision to be a farmer was my young brother. He had always been a sickly kid, so one day he went to a fairing and hired himself out to a Fife yeoman. I did not see him for over a year, and then I scarcely knew him. From a puny spindling he now overshot me by a head. As he towered over me in his stalwart way he seemed to say: "You little fat bank clerk, I could take you over my knee and spank you." While I anxiously repudiated this suggestion, I prudently took boxing lessons. Yes, he roused my inferiority complex. He seemed to be someone I might have been; he was so ruddy, strong and full of energy. I was inspired by his breezy presence. He made us roar with laughter as he described the humours of farm life and was particularly eloquent on the various substitutes for toilet-paper. But he could be serious too. He told me: "You city people are parasites. A farmer's is the most essential of callings. He is the producer of fundamental food,

an independent being who can stand four-square on his own soil and snap his fingers at the world."

"Sounds fine," I said. "Where did you read that?"

"I heard a fellow say it. He was a socialist at the time. He's standing in your shoes right now."

At home, consternation. To leave the bank—it was unthinkable. I was courting disaster. Surely the canny Scot in me would intervene to save me from my crazy impulse. To some of my friends I said it was a matter of health, to others it was a vocation. To none did I confess it was a craving for adventure. The only one to approve was my Accountant. Born on a farm, he had left it too young to be sickened by its endless toil. Standing before the fire with his coat-tails pulled frontally so that his behind got the comfort of its warmth, he spoke only of the pleasant side of farming.

As he talked of cattle and crops, the breath of the moors seemed to sweep into the dusty bank, exhilarating me and confirming me in my sense of destiny. I think he encouraged me because he was so discontented with his own career and realized mine would be even more humble. He was probably right. I hated figures and the problems of high finance inspired me with repulsion. Banking for me would have been a blind alley; but, as I see it now, with my unstable temperament, all of my life would have been a blind alley. I was as destined to failure as the sparks fly upward.

"Fool, take comfort in your folly, hoping it be wisdom in disguise."

This is what I tried to do as I fought the disapproval of my friends. "Leave the bank!" was the horrified cry. The only one who did not protest was himself a banker. Silverman, who was going to the New World, strongly advised me to stick to the Old. "You're too sensitive to be a clod-hopper," he said. "It takes guts to be a horny-handed son of toil. You'll regret your rashness." Mugson said sagely: "Stick to your stool. You have a certain talent for verse. If you try hard enough you may become a little local bard."

I thanked them humbly, but their discouragement only steeled my resolve. Guts! I would show them. A bleating bard! To the devil with poetical tripe. I would be a man in a world of men. So infatuated was I with farming at that moment I would have considered a pigsty a thing of beauty.

Since my athletic year I had neglected my thews and sinews; now I set out to be tough. The gym helped me a lot. It was amazing how my muscles responded to my demand on them. My biceps began to bulge, as I measured them day by day. So rapid was my build-up it seemed as if my body had been waiting for just this chance. My flabby fibre became firm again, and soon I was doing

balances on the parallel bars and climbing the rope hand over hand like a monkey. But the Baths were the scene of my true triumph. This derelict building, which I have previously mentioned, had been taken over by a new company; now, sumptuously renovated, it was the finest establishment of its kind in the country. And it was right across the street from our home. Of course, I became a junior member. The guinea it cost me was a strain on my budget, yet I got value for my money, for I spent most of my time in the gorgeous place.

I was a senior-junior, but there were swarms of junior-juniors who were rather a nuisance, for they were like human frogs, in and out of the water all evening. Yet these kids supplied what I consider was the romance of the Baths. They were just ordinary urchins, but, spending night after night in the pool, they became extraordinary swimmers and divers. Without effort they developed into champions. It was not a case of special aptitude. They excelled in spite of themselves. They were entered for public events and to their own amazement carried everything before them. They practically grew up in the water, so that among them we counted three national champions, and were proud of them. All to show how weedy youths may be transformed into shining athletes. Without this formative institution they would have been picking up girls, inhaling cigarettes and haunting billiard rooms. So much for the wonder of water and what it can do for those who love it.

However, I was only a modest swimmer, content to do my twenty lengths every night. It was by the side of the pool I got in my effective work. I organized what was called the Samson Club. Our aim was muscle-building and we worked for hours every evening with dumb-bells and clubs. We put up heavy weights till it was a wonder we did not strain ourselves. We did stunts on the flying trapeze and swung like apes on the rings. I could walk on my hands and toy with a sixty-pound bar-bell. I was proud to strip off and let others see what I had made of myself. I believe one gets more joy from a beautiful body than from a fine mind. It was hard work to keep up such a standard of perfection, but I persisted more than the others, for I had a goal before me. My dream of being a son of the soil haunted me day and night. Every Sunday I walked far into the country, and the sights and sounds of farm life filled me with delight. I had a perpetual spring-morning feeling in the brain. As I thought of the destiny in store for me I sang with joy.

Then came a disquieting thought. I had no money to buy land. None even to rent it. I might work on a farm for a while; but without capital I could never start on my own. In my dilemma I consulted my rural brother.

"Why not emigrate?" he said. "There's Australia. Too hot. . . . New Zealand—nice climate and old-country atmosphere. Canada—lots of Scotch there. You can take up land on the prairie. For anyone without capital I should vote for Canada." So I went to the Emigration Office and got all kinds of pamphlets. I read them eagerly, gazing at the blurry illustrations. Lovely pictures I thought them. There was that rich prairie soil inviting me to turn it into fields of golden grain. What a wonderful opportunity! Canada held out her arms to me. She won.

So I got all the books I could find in the library, and made myself an authority on the Dominion. I translated myself into prairie life. Already I was a sturdy settler, raising cattle and grain, or riding a bronco and roping steers. The last particularly intrigued me, and I dramatized myself wearing chaps and a big stetson. The dingy office faded out. . . . *I was a cowboy singing under the stars as I rode round the sleeping herd. . . . I was playing a guitar by the camp-fire. . . . I was loping into town with my pay to whoop things up. . . .* Cattle ranching; that was the romantic side of farming, and it was romance that was luring me. As I thought of the future, I had no doubts. I would accept the bad with the good. Instinct told me that, in throwing over the traces and staking my fate on the unknown, I was unconquerably right; and I knew a joy that bordered on ecstasy as I thought: "I, too, will be a cowboy."

Having conceived myself in this character, I prepared for the part. I bought a big knife whose blade shot out by a spring, and called it my scalping knife. I also purchased an air-pistol. Putting a match-box on my bed-post, I practised being quick on the draw. Walking down the room, I would swing round suddenly and plug the box with a lightning-like swing from the hip. . . . *There was Big Mike coming out of the Square Deal Saloon. Bing! He got it through the ribs because I was a split-second quicker on the draw. . . .* I was quick too. I could jerk that pistol up and bang went the match-box every time. But I practised hours to get the trick of it.

All my old enthusiasms were now jettisoned. No more did I care for the theatre, books, sport, socialism. I was finished with the mental life. Henceforth I would be a fellow of brawn and thew. I would work in mines and sawmills, in lumber camps and railway gangs, on ships and ranches. I would run the gamut of toil. But before all I would be a cowboy.

When I announced my Buffalo Bill ambition to the Samson Club, I found I had gained glamour in their eyes. But when I tried to turn them from the smug lives of their kind, they refused to join with me. They had buckled down to the business of making money, and in their eyes I was a half-mad adventurer. Yet these boys were bolder and

braver than I; but they lacked my imagination and sense of romance. No fear of them leaving the meadow for the rocky hill.

I was now twice as strong as the ordinary city boy of my height, and I walked with a chip on my shoulder. I tensed my muscles with a joy in their fitness. I gloried in the thought that I would overcome all difficulties. I pitied the poor boys who were following the beaten track. I would cram my life with colour, even if it meant crimson patches. No doubt I was rash, but an instinct told me I was right. Although it is half a century ago, I still recall the ardour and enthusiasm of my twentieth year. Oh, it is fine to be young and strong and to have courage! Yet courage is often ignorance. I have never been brave in my life. I have realized many of my dreams and found the reality a very dull affair. To seek for gold, to explore the wilds, to sail strange seas, all that is simply in the day's work.

Then to chill my raptures came the thought: "You have no money, not even the six pounds necessary to pay your steerage fare. You will need an outfit, money when you land. You may have the ambition to be a hobo, but you must break in gradually. . . ." So I resigned myself to another year of waiting, during which by grim economy I might be able to save a few pounds. It was about this time Mugson approached me.

"Still determined to go in off the deep end?"

"Only by living dangerously can one keep one's self-respect," I answered.

"Balderdash! You're just making a gesture. Of the gang you're the least equipped to wrestle with a rude world. All these years you've lived under the wing of a paternal institution. We've envied you the cushy time you've had. Now you're going to play a game that's not yours. You're putting yourself in a false position. If you'd lugged demijohns round for two years as I did you'd be better fitted to fight the battle of life."

"I have twice your strength."

"Yes, but half the strength of the average labourer."

"One doesn't need much strength to be a bronco-buster."

"I like your nerve. You've never been on a horse in your life. A donkey on the sands is your measure. You're heading for a hell of a cropper."

"You think I'll come back like a whipped cur? Well, I won't. If I make my bed I'll lie on it."

For a moment he regarded me; then he sighed. "So you're really bent on social suicide?"

"I'm clearing out, if that's what you mean. I feel a compulsion drawing me. It's stronger than myself. . . . I'd go to-morrow if I only had the price. Gosh! it's hard to save money on twenty pounds

a year. By scrimping and scraping for ten months I've only got six pounds. I need about fifteen. It will take me another year to save it; but I'll do it, and I'll show you fellows that, whatever happens, I can take it without a whine." I was going to leave him when he took out of his pocket a cheque.

"There . . . you can have that. It's ten pounds they paid me for *Tom, Dick and Harry*."

I was touched. "Thanks, old chap. I'll never forget. But my future prospects don't justify borrowing. No, I'll always be grateful to you, but when I go it must be under my own steam."

Poor old Mugson! He went away looking a little crestfallen. But we Scotch are poor borrowers. Perhaps it is foolish to be too independent. As a race we are proud and sensitive, and I have always felt I would rather starve than be under an obligation to anyone. Still, I was feeling considerably discouraged when one morning the Manager called me into his office.

"You have been promoted to be junior clerk at the St. Mungo Branch." He paused impressively. "*Seventy pounds a year*." The jump took my breath away. Yet it was not the promotion but the increase of salary that thrilled me. Here would be my expenses to Canada.

"I shall be sorry to leave you, sir," I said; and indeed it was with regret I left the office where I had passed so many cheerful years. He gave me a wonderful testimonial, accusing me of willingness, industry and intelligence—everything I was not. As I read I blushed with shame to think how I had abused so much forbearance and patience. I had really taken no interest in my work, though I had performed it passably well. I had never looked on it as more than a means to an end. However, I put away that testimonial and treasured it for years. It was the only certificate anyone ever gave me, and it was to play a decisive part in my destiny.

Here was my chance to save, and I scrimped harder than ever. I became mean and miserly, as I watched my bank account grow and I gloated over its figures. But in this city branch my expenses were greater. I had to dress better and take my lunch at a restaurant. There were, however, eating places where you helped yourself and paid what you owed. They took your word for it, and I fear that though I worked in the bank my powers of calculation did not always rise to the occasion. It was easy to forget you had eaten two buns instead of one. However, conscience overtook me, and I tried to count up all the pennies I had failed to declare. Then one day, instead of paying the usual sixpence, I tendered half a crown. The surprise of the cashier was great. How could anyone eat so many buns and drink so much milk? He stared at me with such dark suspicion I never dared to return.

I am afraid that if I had asked my new Manager for a testimonial it would have been a very bad one indeed. For I felt my banking career was drawing to a close and did not care whether I pleased or not. I got frequent reprimands from my new Accountant. Often I felt like saying: "Well, it's no use getting mad with me. I'm leaving anyway." But I was prudent in my imprudence. I wanted to wait until I was twenty-one before giving notice. Spring would best give me a happy start to a life of hazard. And at last the great moment came. For long I had looked forward to it. Now I was going to declare my contempt for the trammels of commercialism. I felt no regret, no fear—only exultation and a faith in the future. I entered the Manager's room with meek serenity.

"I want to give my resignation."

He looked at me in amazement. He was a dignified man with a pendulous stomach. He wore gold-rimmed eye-glasses, astride a red and bulbous nose.

"Resign! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going cattle ranching in Canada," I said.

Further amazement. Then: "Well, I suppose you know your own business best." I wondered if I did. Suddenly it was borne on me that I was doing something incredibly foolish, but it was too late to draw back. I said: "I want to live an open-air life."

"Humph! I suppose you realize that the bank offers you a safe and permanent position. You may even rise to be a manager like myself." I did not want to be like him. He was really a warning to me, as his desk made a dent in his ponderous stomach. He breathed asthmatically. "I also suppose you know that if you serve another forty years you may retire on a pension."

I thought of my fellow-clerks, their pallor and grey hair. They were waiting for that pension. When they gained it they would be ready to die. They often did. Poor fools! Well, I would not make their mistake. . . . "I quite appreciate that," I said "but I want a free life. I've always been interested in horses and cattle."

He stared absently out of the window. I, too, stared. His look was wistful, even dreamy. At that moment I saw him transfigured. . . . *He was a rugged Highland Scot, clad in the tartan, high up on a misty mountain, with a pair of shaggy dogs and a herd of huge-horned cattle.* That was what he should have been. He had missed his destiny and he knew it. So after a little he turned to me:

"Well, you know best. I only wish I had your years. Then, by Goad, my lad, I'd go along with ye."





BOOK FOUR  
*MANHOOD*



## Chapter One

### STEERAGE EMIGRANT

“HURRAH!” says I. “Launched on the great adventure at last.” The day was charming and I was seated on the forward hatch of the tramp steamer. The sea was shimmering, gold-spangled plain through which we ploughed. It welcomed us, laughing and leaping in little waves. The sky was without a cloud. Never before had I seen a cloudless sky, never before set foot on a ship. I looked around with happy eyes. On the tarred cover of the hatch two men had chalked a checker board and were playing with potato chips. They had sallow faces and wore cloth caps. A slender boy with a sensitive face was cuddling a fiddle.

“I’m a pitman,” he told me. “There’s a lot of us going to the coal mines.” I was surprised. In the Long Grey Town colliers had been looked on as the scum of the country, but these men were gentle and intelligent. They had a pride in their calling. They told me they would rather work underground than above. They were well paid and doing work of high social value. Pitmen, I found, were a proud folk, self-respecting and independent. The world should be grateful to them.

Watching the game was a grey-haired man. “I am a hatter,” he told me. “My son has taken up a homestead on the prairie and is farming it. I’m going to join him. My! but I’m looking forward to the land after a lifetime spent in a city street. I’m going to tend the garden, chop wood and draw water. It’s like being born again. I’ve sent my wife ahead. She’s waiting for me. I’m sure we’re going to be awful happy.” . . . Near him was a fine, upstanding young man. “I played football for Renton,” he told us. “I hope there’s a team in Medicine Hat. In Scotland I was a wee frog in a big puddle; now it may be different. Football’s a grand game. It’s all I care for.”

Farm hands were returning for the spring work after spending the winter in the old country. They were glad to be going back to what they now regarded as their home. All had taken up land and looked forward to a bright future. Quite another crowd were the drovers who had come over with shipments of cattle. They were wild fellows, who drank and swore and scoffed at the idea of settling down.

But all told me I could get work easily, and this thought added to my exhilaration. The air was so tonic; the sea rippled in rosy

waves; everyone seemed full of hope and happiness. They were going to a land where there was work and welcome for all. How quickly the time passed! I was so interested in the fresh types and the new expressions. With the cruel egoism of youth, I seldom thought of the life I had left behind. I rarely remembered my family and my friends, and they grew vaguer as time went on. The past was memory, the future dream. To live was to squeeze the essence of the moment.

That is what I tried to do. I welcomed hardship with spirit. I did not mind poor food and hard berths. It was part of the game. A vagabond life, I thought, may be more constructive than a sedentary one. I would give myself three years of roaming, then settle down. I had a pocket edition of *An Amateur Emigrant*, and I compared my experience with Stevenson's, wishing I could write half as well as he.

There was one drawback, however. I had put the wrong label on my Gladstone bag and it was stowed away in the hold. All my toilet articles and changes of clothes were in it, so that I had nothing but those in which I stood. Every day my collar grew grimmer and my chin shaggier. I shunned observation. Shabby, unshorn, I shrank into my shell. There were some bonnie lassies on board, but I became invisible to them. I took comfort in the thought that I was actually roughing it from the start, and wondered how the philosophy of Stevenson would have stood the strain.

As our voyage neared its end, expectation mounted to excitement. There was fog . . . icebergs . . . the bleak shores of Newfoundland. Quebec . . . toylike houses . . . villages with church spires . . . a man driving a buggy. All evening I gazed shoreward, seeing moving lights, and speculating on the mystery of the dim land. I looked forward to my first sight of a native Canadian with as much curiosity as if he had been a Patagonian.

I helped to make the usual collection for the steward, giving a half-crown, which I could ill afford. One old fellow gave a penny. When I suggested that it was insufficient he said with an air of generosity: "Well, I'll make it tippence."

Of course my eagerness was out of proportion to the event. I might have been Columbus discovering the New World, so excited was I. But my arrival in Canada was one of the great moments in my life and my emotions were correspondingly dynamic. We reached Quebec in the early hours where a solitary watchman greeted us from the wharf. He was a tallow-faced man with a goatee. He shouted in some strange lingo, then welcomed us with grand gestures.

With a rare eagerness I watched the unloading of the cargo. My eyes were riveted on the scene and no detail escaped me. I heard the longshoremen jabbering in that strange tongue. I breathed

deeply the vitalizing air, I simmered with rapture. "Here I am," I said, "a traveller—I who was destined to be a stay-at-home. By my own will I have achieved this. I am where my boyhood friends will never be. I am superior to those who looked down on me. Now I can patronize the best of them; for does not travel bestow on one the garland of experience?"

Vain thoughts, but they inflated me. It is not what we are but what we *think* we are that matters. At that moment I felt distinguished to a degree I have rarely felt since. And exultantly I reflected: "It is only the beginning. From now on, every day will be full of changing scenes and teeming with new characters. No more rubber-stamp living." So though no one envied me because I was poor and friendless, I envied no one because I was young and in love with life. . . .

I saw nothing of Montreal. The train was waiting near the landing wharf and I had only time to buy a few provisions. We were going on an emigrant wagon. There were large racks on which we piled our baggage, and benches of varnished pine. There was no bedding of any kind and this pleased me. I welcomed hardship, I gloated in discomfort. That night I slept on the luggage rack, with my coat for a blanket and my Gladstone bag for a pillow. However, I was first up in the morning and held the toilet against a host of besiegers. There I arrayed myself in a Buffalo Bill costume Papa had bought for me in an auction room, for he too had a romantic conception of me. It consisted of a pair of high circus boots and a sombrero. Thus attired I felt equal to any occasion.

To my eyes, so anointed with wonder, the wilds of Ontario were fascinating. True, I saw little but fire-scorched woods, and the occasional surprise of a lake. It was a blue eye staring up from the forest-grey, but it gave me a thrill. How happy I could be on its shores with a rod, a gun and a canoe! The wildness of the country charmed me. It was so gloriously empty. A fellow had Room. Thoreau and Borrow fought in me, the one to make me live by a lake, the other to urge me to ramble on. If at that moment Sir Wilfrid Laurier had offered to make me his secretary I would have politely refused. "No, Sir," I would have said, "I want to wander and work with my hands."

To see the ordinary with eyes of marvel may be a gift; or it may be there is no ordinary and wonder is true vision. In any case it keeps one spiritually intact; and it must be a rare quality, for none of my fellow-travellers had it. Most of them grumbled at the casual progress of our train, which dawdled to such an extent that I was tempted to jump off and run alongside. Good job I didn't, for that speed was deceptive and I should probably have been left behind.

In the coach ahead were a party of Armenians, accompanied by an interpreter. They were dressed like peasants. They made soup that was water with grease swimming in it. This, with bread, comprised a meal. I remarked to the interpreter on their poverty. He said:

"Don't you believe it. Every man of them has at least a hundred dollars tucked away in his jeans. Have you that much?" I hadn't. At that moment my entire capital was a dollar ninety-five cents.

The prairie delighted me by its very monotony. Indeed I did not find it dull. I saw cattle eating from straw-stacks and men ploughing with oxen. I said: "Here is my future home. I will settle on a section like this and dwell in one of these doll-like houses that look doubly diminutive in the vast emptiness."

We stopped at small villages whose names delighted me. One was called Moose Jaw. It consisted of a muddy street lined with shacks. In a small store I bought some provisions, spending the last of my money on hard-tack, sardines and jam. I was beginning to worry about money. From now on the going would be hard.

In a saloon I saw some of the younger lads from the ship drinking and laughing. Among them was the football player. They were hilariously happy when suddenly came a warning whistle from the train. I jumped on as it was moving. Looking back I saw the party from the saloon running to catch it. Behind me was the Negro porter seeming anxious. "Dey cain't make it," he muttered. "Dey's gonna be left in dat dere burg." There were three of them. The first two managed to jump on; the third stumbled and slid under the train. The Negro made a grimace.

"He's killed for sure. Ain't dat no luck? Jes' when folks is goin' in for lunch! Dey ain't goin' to have no appetite."

The train stopped. Some distance away I saw a small crowd gathered round a figure on the ground. I ran back. On my way I passed a red boot and a sock and the protruding splinter of a shin bone; but I did not pick them up. Lying in the midst of the group was the footballer. His face was chalky white and he was moaning: "Mither! I want ma mither." Then a man came along holding a boot and a jagged section of bone and flesh. "Every wheel went over him," he said; "every bloody wheel."

As we approached Winnipeg, the latter became very excited. He combed out his beard. His eyes shone with happiness.

"My wife's meeting me at the station. We'll all take the stage out to the homestead. To-morrow I'll be raising vegetables in my own garden. I'll be chopping the firewood and bringing water from the well. Won't I be the happy man!" It was the moment he had

dreamed of, and he kept dwelling on it. He would wear overalls and a broad-brimmed straw hat. No more felts for him. No more grubby streets. He was realizing the dream of a lifetime.

As we drew into the station a large, comely woman was awaiting him. Beside her was a young one, even more pleasing. Nimbly hopping from the train he embraced them.

"Where's my son?" he asked anxiously.

"Out at the farm. He was too busy to come in."

"Then we maun be gettin' out there. I'm jist dyin' to see the place. Let's get along."

But they hung back. "We're not going," they said excitedly. "We can't live on the prairie. We've taken rooms here in town and here we mean to stay."

The old chap stared in dismay. "But the garden and the chickens and all that?"

"If you want to you can go alone, but we're not going," said his wife.

Then the younger one broke in. "It's dreadful on the prairie. It's all right for European peasants, but for a civilized woman it's appalling. I'll never rejoin my husband there. I want him to sell the farm and come back to town." The elder took it up. "You're not going out there, John. You're just going to stay here with us two. We like Winnipeg, but the prairie—oh, it's simply terrible. You can get a job here. We've already got one promised for you. They want good hatters . . ."

I left them arguing, and by the way they led him off I don't think he had any chance against them. I expect he spent the rest of his life cleaning and blocking hats.

This gave me my first inkling that life on the prairie was not all I had imagined. It rather depressed me, but I reflected: "Well, it doesn't matter. I have a ticket for British Columbia. I can keep going till I bump into the Pacific Ocean. After all, maybe the prairie is only fit for Swedes and Slovacs. Growing grain is not my idea of romance." Besides, the prairie was so devastatingly flat. I was afraid it might bore me. It did not seem a fit frame for a dashing young man who wore Napoleonic boots and a Spanish hat and who looked like the ring-master in a circus. Yet I must admit my outfit caused little excitement. There were so many outlandish costumes around me, Hungarian, Italian, Roumanian, that mine seemed quite commonplace.

Arrived in Alberta I felt the same reluctance to grapple with grim reality. There the prairie was rolling, but it could not roll too much for me. I was beginning to feel a rolling stone anyhow. It was not that I lacked vitality. Indeed I was keyed up and effer-



vescent with enthusiasm. However, all that did not incline me favourably to the job of making a hard living by the sweat of my brow. On the contrary, the more I voyaged, even though the going was tough, the more I wanted to keep going. Such was my westward impetus that only the barrier of the salt sea could arrest it. And I wondered if that could.

My big worry was financial. I had landed in Canada with five dollars in my pocket. Luckily I sold my Gladstone bag to a fellow-passenger for ten dollars and bought for three a canvas contraption that better suited my circumstances. Then on the train I exchanged for six dollars a Harris tweed suit. At Winnipeg I got rid of my gun for a "ten spot." At Calgary I let my camera go for fifteen. My westward trail was studded with items of my outfit as I realized them in terms of cash. I felt some compunction when I thought of how poor Papa had combed auction rooms for these articles and presented them to me with such pride. Yet he got so much joy in doing it that the thought consoled me. My outfit served me well, though not in the way it was intended.

As I look back, I see myself a feckless young fool without any apprehension for the future. I had never worked hard, and already I felt an aversion for strenuous forms of toil. Perhaps this was why I dallied, putting off the evil day when I would have to come to grips with reality. So in a spirit of irresponsibility I crossed the Rockies, revelling in the sheer glory of peak and glacier. Here was something greater than my imagination had ever conceived. As I looked awe-struck at rivers roaring through canyon walls, I thought that these moments alone justified my joust at jeopardy. It was so gorgeous I grudged every minute I could not devour the scenery with my eyes, and got up in the first dawn light so that I should miss nothing. But I was alone. None of my companions shared my ecstasies.

Then we seemed to have left all that behind. I awoke one morning to find we were speeding through a land of forest to the sounding sea. My Nemesis of toil was nearing. I began to be afraid.

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## Chapter Two

### MUD PUPIL

I WAS standing in the green wonder of the primeval forest, who only two months before had been drooping in the grey drizzle of a Scotch city. Lover of contrasts, here was one that overwhelmed me. Where I had been pushing a pen, behold me now swinging an axe. Instead of grimy walls were pillared aisles of trees unbelievably tall. Pines made a cathedral hush around me. The silence was supreme, the aloneness absolute. I could have hugged myself for joy. Here was justification for slipping away from greasy commerce. Again I thought: Let my folly never give me anything more than this moment, I will have no regret.

But I looked without enthusiasm at the axe in my hand. Each stroke jarred me, and the thought that I was destroying life chilled me. I was a tree-killer—I, who loved them and looked on them as friends. I would have enjoyed being a tree, but I would not have liked a clumsy young vandal to hack me down with a blunt blade. Let the wind lay me low when time rotted my heart; but to be prematurely slaughtered by my only enemy Man, and a poor city specimen at that—what a sorry fate!

Now *sawing*—that was another matter. I was operating on something already dead, to bring it to life again in heat and flame. As I worked the saw back and forth it seemed to sing a song of its usefulness. I liked the graceful body-swing, as it snored in the cut. I liked the sudden freedom as the block dropped away. I loved the sight and smell of the sawdust and the odour of the sticky gum. Above all, I was happy because I could dream. For the work was functional. It left my mind free to rove from the past to the future. And again, working with my body was good. I was making something useful, even if it were only firewood. I could not believe that writing figures in a book was either useful or constructive. And here I was, no longer a parasite but a fundamental worker.

Yes, I was richly happy as I swung to my cross-cut saw. What matter though I had not a cent in the world. Joy sang in me, for I had not a care. I had reduced life to simple elements. I wore the rough overalls of the toiler, the denim shirt and heavy boots; but I

was prouder of them than I would have been of a suit from Savile Row. Lucky me, I thought, with so much of life before me and such a heart for enjoying it. For Youth itself was a source of exultation. So much happy living lay in front, I was sorry for folks even ten years my senior. I had still to spend the time they had used up. And I had no fear of the future. Bronzed by the sun, my muscles hardened by toil, I was in a new world, a pioneer, a trail-breaker.

Such my dreams as I sawed my way through a four-foot log and swung to the song of the saw. I did not realize that I was playing a part. Then as I paused to preen myself in my rôle of a "man in a world of men" I saw a movement in the bushes. A big, black head rose out of the brush. By gosh! a *bear*. . . . It was standing on its hind legs eating berries. It would take a bunch of bushes in its arms, gather them together and pick off the fruit. It was leisurely and appreciative, but too near for my taste, so I gave a startled shout. Then the head vanished and I heard a crashing through the brush. Here, I thought, was something to write home about.

I was working for the MacTartans, a Shetland family who some ten years before had rounded Cape Horn to found a new home. The result of their adventure was a farm carved from the forest. The sons, Jock and Bung, who ran the ranch, were six-foot stalwarts with a genial tolerance and a gift for ragging their very green mud pupil. Pitted against them, I discovered that my gymnasium muscles were sadly wanting. True, my biceps compared imposingly with their stringy arms, yet when it came to the strain of a day's work I could not hold my own. I was ashamed of the way I played out so quickly when it came to packing hay in a hot mow, but my humiliation spurred me to grim effort and gradually my muscles took on the tough fibre of the labourer.

I soon found that there were some jobs I preferred to others. I liked work that left my mind free, that was not too hard, and that made no demands on either skill or resource. For instance, I hated handling horses. One had to give one's whole attention to them. Also I disliked competitive work, in which one had to keep up with the other fellow. I liked to toil alone, and I did not mind how monotonous the job as long as it was mechanical.

My first task was picking up stones from a field. It was of about an acre, yet I aimed to have it clear of stones in a day or two. So I collected them cordially, and carried them in a sack to the side of the field. But the more I picked the more there seemed to be. They were laughing at me, I thought—multiplying before my eyes. I grew discouraged. What price the fat little bank clerk who thought he was going to be a dashing cowboy! It seemed I was on the wrong side of the Rockies for a would-be bronco-buster. . . . My next job

was even less to my taste. It was to weed a field of turnips. I had to crawl up the rows, tearing away the weeds, and eliminating most of the baby turnips. A cruel business. Surely weeds had a right to live. It was only because they were unwanted they were called weeds. The unwanted people of this world were weeds and should be destroyed. Poor weeds! Maybe I was one myself. . . . And the young turnips so ruthlessly sacrificed that their fortunate brothers should thrive and grow strong. Sad superfluous turnip plants! They made me think of the underdogs of the world.

With such musings I tried to lighten my labour, but my hands were worn raw and my back ached abominably. The heat was terrific, I wore a big-brimmed straw hat and my shirt hung outside my trousers. I was baked brown and stained with soil. To cheer me I looked at the blue purity of the sky, the mountains that rose to meet it, the unexplored bush that came right down to the clearing. . . . Here was a dream world worthy of a dreamer. I was quite alone. The silence was one of murmurous sound, of the droning of innumerable insects. The heat radiated like wavering sheets of cellophane. I hated the grovelling toil. I despised myself for doing it; but—well, if it was the price I had to pay for all this beauty, then I was glad to pay it. So with a sense of fulfilment I turned again to my turnip rows.

But soon haying began and I liked that better. The heat increased. Toward four in the afternoon it was a comfort to pitch in the shady side of the wagon. We brought buckets of water into which we dropped handfuls of oatmeal and drank as if we never could have enough. We fanned our torsos with our flapping shirts. We panted and sweated. It was a relief to unload the last wagon and go off to milk.

I never became a good milker. At first I was given the poorest cows so that I could not spoil them, but I fear they were none the better for my manipulation. A cow must be milked fast or she will hold up her milk. My cows all held up. Still, it was restful with my head butted into the cow's flank and my right leg between her two hind ones, so that she could not kick me over. She could switch her tail, though, giving me hard flicks of mingled hair and manure till I tied it to her leg.

The wife of the Jap farm hand used to help me with the milking. As she cowered under the cow she had a tiny baby strapped to her back. It was just like a doll, but it was shamefully neglected. All day it lay in their wretched shack and never cried. It did not seem to know how. Flies crawled over its face, even walking into its wide black eyes, but it did not blink. It seemed to have lost all sensitiveness to discomfort and pain. It was inevitable that in the cold and

damp of the winter it should perish. It did, and was buried, I was told, in a soap-box behind the cow-barn.

In one of my first letters home I enclosed a mosquito that had bitten me. At first, despite my fatigue, they kept me awake at night, but I became inured to them. Soon they did not bother me, and their stings caused neither inflammation nor itching. Often after lunch, sitting in the sun with the boys, I would let a mosquito settle on an arm, dig down and swell with blood. The idea was to squash it just as it was full to capacity. Sometimes one waited a second too long and saw it take off, gorged to the gills. Then profanity was in order. Otherwise a broad red smudge testified to one's timing. The game was to see who could show the biggest blood-splotch.

Apart from mosquitoes, sandflies were a pest in the early evening. They irritated, but did not bite hard. Worst of all was the black fly. It had a way of getting under one's collar. Its bite was poisonous and the swelling often lasted for days.

When I first visited London, after fifteen years spent in the wilds, I went into a shop in the Burlington Arcade. It was devoted entirely to ties and the display was a very gaudy one. I said: "I want a tie." The shopman said: "What school, sir?" I was taken aback. At first I wanted to say "Borstal," but thought better of it. Instead I said carelessly: "Oh, I don't care. Any old school will do as long as it's not too prismatic. I don't want it for a minstrel show." The shopman nearly fell to the floor with horror. Disgustedly they sold me a contraption in orange and chocolate.

I wore it that night on the boat to France. I felt rather ashamed of it, thinking it in bad taste. However, I was roaming the deck when I saw a man wearing a similar one. He hailed me. "Good evening. I see we come from the same school." He pointed to my tie and I said: "Ha! Ha! Good old school."

"By Jove, yes. Good old Hangover. We did have some great rags there. You must have been long before my time, though."

"Oh yes, about twenty years before, I suppose."

"How ripping! And still you think of the old school."

"By Jove, yes. Jolly old Hangover! How could I ever forget it!"

"No, indeed. Who was Head when you were there?"

"Head? . . . by gad! it's so long ago and I've quite lost my memory for names. I remember we used to call him 'Tuppence.'"

"It wasn't by any chance Harvey?"

"That's it. Tuppence Harvey. Good old boy. Whacked me proper because I sauced the French Master. Frogs, we called him. Then there was the German Master. We called him Sausage. And the Chemistry Master was known as Stinks."

"Oh! I am surprised. So they taught chemistry then?"

"Yes, sort of experiment. Don't think they kept it up. Too modern. . . . Bad form and all that. Well, it was a great school and if you'll excuse me, I'm not feeling any too well. Rotten sailor, you know. So glad to have met you. Good old Hangover." So I beat a retreat and spent the rest of the voyage dodging him.

I relate this because I now found myself in a settlement glorified by the Old School Tie. I do not suppose that in all the Empire there was a community so dominated by the public school mentality. Here were people of the *pukka* type the snob novelists take for granted. Once I said to an Englishman: "The trouble with us is we think we are the finest people in the world." He answered in amazement: "Well, we jolly well are, aren't we?"

In our colony the men were all Old School Tie boys. The older ones were often retired military or naval officers. They prided themselves that the settlement was a "little bit of old England, by Gad!" They dressed like squires and expected the hired man to touch his hat. They would tell you they were not Canadians, they were British Columbians. Our community was also the haven for the Younger Sons. They were remittance men, sent out by their families who were glad to be rid of them. They kept ponies and played polo. They dressed in yellow leggings, knee breeches and Norfolk jackets. Many of these young bloods came to the house in the evening and the conversation consisted entirely of horses and dogs, guns and fishing. One would have thought that art and literature did not exist. Indeed, to have mentioned such subjects would have tabbed one a bit of a bounder. As I sat tongue-tied in their company, no doubt they regarded me with suspicion. How often I wished I could steal away and read a book, any kind of book.

Such was the unique colony in which I now found myself. The men I met were sublimely sure of themselves. They took it for granted that their race was the salt of the earth and their class the flower of that race. Can it be wondered that my inferiority complex flourished in their midst and that I felt a grubby vulgarian? They regarded me with such patronizing sufferance I felt it was a privilege to endure them.

And our settlement was as poor as it was proud. It is interesting to note how a community can get along without money. With us currency was so scarce it was almost non-existent. A silver dollar was almost something to put in a glass case. Business was done by barter. The farmers traded their grain, milk, butter, eggs and fruit for flour, tea, tobacco and sugar. Yet ours was a society in which there was no want. All were poor; few had any real money, and no one seemed to need it.

What I will call the Snob crowd came for the most part from impoverished county families who jealously preserved the customs of their class. While sons and husbands worked in the fields, the women-folk, dolled up in old-fashioned finery, drove in rickety buggies with superannuated farm horses, to leave cards on their friends. They lived in a mid-Victorian atmosphere of tea, tattle and tennis. Sunday church was the great gathering-place. It was Anglican, of course, as the native Canadian usually went to Chapel.

I do not know what the future has to offer us in the way of a classless society, but when I think of the deep cleavage that divided our community I feel as if I had lived in a past century. The English emigrants regarded the Canadian pioneers with disdain and called them mossbacks. On the other hand, the Canadian frontiersmen who had carved homes from the wilderness spoke of "damn fool Englishmen" and felt for them contempt and dislike.

But one thing they had in common—a determination to work hard. With his gospel of stern toil the Canadian had converted the Englishman. It was either that or go under. And the Englishman, snob though he might be, was a sport and a fighter. He would not let the native beat him in the field. The patrician must prove himself the equal of the roughneck; so he pitched in for all he was worth, and in time he too came to accept the gospel of toil. Thus the standard of merit with us was a man's fitness to do hard physical work. If you could sweat all down your back you were a worthy member of society. If you could not, you were a loafer and beyond the pale. Laziness was the worst reproach that could be levelled against one, and few dared invite it.

I realized this quite early. At first it was pride made me hold up my end; then it was a decision that if I had to do a thing I might as well do it well. For instance, I was told to clean out a pigsty. The manure was packed so tight it was like cement. I could have dawdled all day at the job. I might have dreamed the hours away, for one can dream even in a pigsty. But I plied my four-pronged fork with a will and had the job finished by noon. It was some satisfaction that when I sat down to lunch the stink of me was so strong the female members of the family had to leave the table.

The harvest days were over and I had been initiated into most forms of farm work. Some of them I liked; some I hated. It made me feel cheap to rise at five-thirty in the morning and fetch the cows from the wet bush. The field work was not so bad. Pitching hay or grain was enjoyable, for my muscles responded to the task. Getting in the potatoes and the roots was not unpleasant, for it involved no hard labour. Gathering the apples in the orchard was like a charming game, with all around the changing foliage and the bracing air

of Indian summer. Best of all was the threshing. We joined in to form a bee. We had a fine lunch and found the day almost a holiday. We joked and laughed, making a play out of toil. I volunteered for the tail of the carrier, which was a dusty job, but not physically exhausting. I always preferred dirty work to strenuous effort.

So passed my apprenticeship to farm labour. I acquitted myself well, because there was nothing else I could do. I worked harder than ever in my life; or rather I worked hard for the first time in my life. And from the first I realized that I hated hard work. Yes, with a feeling of horror I now knew that I had made a hideous mistake. For from now on, nothing but hard work lay before me. I had sold myself to serfdom. I had freedom only to starve. I had relinquished my heritage of easy living for the grimmest life I could have chosen. True, farm work was not so gruelling as other forms of labour, but there was no end to it. I had plunged myself into a morass from which I saw no way out.

On the other hand, I was never so strong and healthy. Yet that would get me nowhere. As a farm labourer I was not as good as the Jap who worked alongside me, and I felt he despised me. Yes, I had brought myself down to a low level. But I consoled myself that if my work was not so constructive outwardly, it might be inwardly. All experience may be good, even the bad. And I still had my cowboy complex, though it had suffered severe discouragement. The first time I mounted a horse was when Jock MacTartan told me to get on the bare back of a bronco, then gave it a whack on the rump. It made off at a mad gallop, while I held on by its mane. For about a mile I slithered around, finally locking my arms about its neck. Fortunately I managed to stick on.

Then one day Bung took me for a ride to visit some people and have tea. I wore my circus boots and white flannel trousers. I rather fancied myself as a dashing cavalier, but when I tried to descend from the saddle I found I was glued to it. At the tea-party was a fat girl who made a poem on my plight. Afterward she became famous as a writer. Most people know her name so I will not give it; but if she reads this she may remember that her virgin muse was first inspired by the gory seat of my pants. After that, I felt less cowboy-minded. It was nice to have experience, but I felt I was going to pay bitterly for mine.



## Chapter Three

### BACKWOODS RANCH

THE frame shack cowered in the shadow of the pines. Ramshackle, rain-sodden and innocent of paint, it made a disreputable blot in the clearing. Knee-high grass grew up to its walls and a rickety scaffolding caged it in. Thirty years before, young Hank had rigged up that scaffolding, intending to add another story to his home. He had answered an ad. in which an attractive widow wanted a loving mate. She was to come out and join him and they would be married in the new house. But something slipped and the lady backed out. Young Hank had not the heart to take down the scaffolding, so there it remained, a witness of frustrated hopes and dreams. . . . And now old Hank was the same slow-moving moss-back he had been thirty years ago. Rather a lovable man, gentle, patient and slovenly, he was lonely. He wanted someone to keep him company during the winter, and I had taken on the job.

So behold me installed in my new home at the end of everything. For it was the most outlying house in the settlement, and beyond it was a land that had never been crossed by human foot. The shack stood in a clearing, engulfed by Douglas pine three hundred feet high. Enough had been felled to give it breathing space, and to ensure that none were near enough to crash on it in a day of storm. The fallen trees lay criss-cross where they had been chopped down, and made a barrier around us. Fireweed grew up to the very door.

A narrow trail led to a small prairie where coarse grass grew, which Hank cut for hay. He had about twenty head of cattle that roamed the mountain all summer and came home in winter. I was really living on a cattle ranch, a cowboy without a horse. Hank had a lazy man's ideal of farming, the less labour the better. It was also mine.

The shack consisted of two sections, the living-room and a bedroom. There was also a cubby-hole under the roof where Hank slept. He mounted to it by a ladder, drawing it after him at night. He was believed to have a sum of money hidden there and to be afraid of robbers. He ceased doing this when I came, but I never saw his den. I believe the reason he discouraged visits was that it was very filthy. Every morning he descended carrying a "jerry" which he told me

had once belonged to the Premier of the Province. He was very proud of it, and it was precious, as he suffered from prostatitis.

I had the bedroom to sleep in, but it had no bed. Indeed, it had no furniture at all. I couched on the floor, lying on a buffalo-robe and wrapped in a mackinaw blanket. And from the moment I went there, for all of seven years, I never slept between sheets.

Primed with my newly discovered hate of hard labour, I energetically cultivated laziness. I had little to do but light the morning fire, sweep out the living-room, bake the bread and help Hank to feed his stock. I also used to saw wood and pile it for the fire. Outside of that I was my own master.

Oh, the joy of liberty after six months of slavery! In that time I had done enough to hold me for a year. Again I declare—I like farming. It is the healthfullest of lives and the most useful. It is full of interest and excitement; but there is a lot of drudgery and its chores are endless. When another man's toil is done he can forget it, but a farmer's is never done.

Even to-day I could enjoy having a small farm if I could hire another man to do the work. I would pay him and pity him, but I would not want to help him. He could milk and clean the barn and feed the pigs. I would give him my moral support, but I would not lift a finger to aid him. For seven years I lived *on* a farm and my interest never flagged. Theoretically I was an authority on agriculture. I read many books and could talk convincingly from pigs to poultry. Thus by avoiding contact with the soil I kept my enthusiasm for it.

Yes, I was happy because I belonged to myself again. Freedom was the finest thing in the world. Later I came to think health more important; but in youth liberty is most to be prized. I was as careless as a breeze. I gave the future no thought. When the evil day came I would meet it; in the meantime let me live lyrically. But I would control my destiny. I would never allow myself to be shaped by circumstances.

Perhaps I might become a writer. The thought was always at the back of my mind. I might commit all kinds of folly, but my pen would save me in the end. It may have been that instinctive confidence that made me so jaunty in assurance and challenging of fate. All this, I thought, was but a preparation. Some day I would get my chance and I would take it. Yet how many like me have dreamed and dawdled on the dreary road to failure! I did not realize how I had been mentally starved during the past six months till I found in the shack a pile of *Harper's Magazines*. It seemed like a treasure to me. I devoured them, and never did I get such delight from the

printed page. Avidly I read, finding each word vital, each phrase pregnant.

We get from a writer what we bring to him, and sometimes we get more than he intended. Our intelligence fuses with his, and his words go deeper than ever he purposed. We may read a passage a dozen times and it leaves us unmoved; then there comes a special mood when it burns like a living flame. We must be hungry to appreciate literary fare. In my case I was famished. I read those magazines from end to end. Nothing in them bored me, much enraptured me. Every page had the pulse of life in it, and many passages had the preciousness of words engraved on brass. But most luminous of all were some articles on Southern California. They dealt with the fruitlands, and had wonderful photographs of groves and orchards. These articles were like a beacon light to me. They gave me a new incentive, a fresh inspiration.

As I dreamed over them I vowed I would visit that earthly paradise. I would pick oranges and grape-fruit, olives, figs, walnuts, in that wonderful sunshine. I would work in drying sheds and canning factories. Serenely I announced my intentions: "I'm going to Riverside to be a fruit-grower." It was so easy to make my dreams come true. More prosperous people were tied down; I was free to voyage where I willed. The price might be poverty, even material failure. . . . Well, I was willing to pay it. As I looked at the clod-minded youths around me I felt that they were in a rut. My plans might be excitingly uncertain, but I was on the trail of adventure.

To reach our shack one had to tramp three miles through the woods. We had no near neighbours, the closest being a half-hour hike through the brush. This was a dwarf who lived with his mother in a cabin halfway to the settlement.

The old lady was tall and straight, with silvery hair and handsome features. She had a number of sons and daughters equally handsome, but she cared more for her misshapen offspring than for all the others. It was as if she were trying to make up to him for the horror of his birth. At first sight he affected me painfully. Later I got used to him and came rather to like him, or at least to feel pity for him. I would help him to get his sheep into the fold, or do other chores around the house. For he had little arms like flippers and tiny twisted legs that allowed him to squat on the ground with imperceptible effort. He could neither run on his stubby feet nor do much with his pudgy hands. But he had the torso of a normal man and a head twice as big.

He did not appreciate the solicitude of his mother; in fact, I sometimes thought he hated her for having brought him into the world. He snarled at her and looked with rancour at his stalwart brothers.

He said to me once: "Why couldn't she have made such a good job of *me*? Or why didn't she smother me in my cradle?"

He was the cruelest man I have ever known. He seemed to get real pleasure from the infliction of pain on animals, and his chief victim was his old grey mare. She was skin and bone, but he drove her mercilessly. On her back she had a big open sore that was full of maggots. To the lash of his whip he had attached a wire nail, and with this he used to flick the mare on the raw place. It made her jump and pull like mad.

One day, trudging the snowy trail, I heard the jingle of sleigh-bells and there was the dwarf, with his old grey mare. He ordered me to get on the sleigh, for he had a peremptory way that brooked no denial. After we had driven a little distance he handed me the reins, and diving in the straw of the sleigh-box he brought out a bottle of whisky; then producing a knife with a cork-screw, he told me to open it. He had a fierce manner and I was a little afraid, so I complied. It was something he could not do himself, yet in helping him I had a feeling of guilt. Brute though he was, there was something manly about him. I realized that here was a being who did not know the meaning of fear. Now he showed it, for tilting the raw liquor to his lips he drank long and deep. When he put down the bottle it was almost half empty. Then after asking me to take a drink, he made me cork the bottle and hide it under the straw. He took the lines again, but after a few yards he fell senseless.

As I drove him home the mare kept looking back as if she knew what had happened. Perhaps she was unused to such gentle handling, but she became a little unruly, often swerving dangerously close to the ditch. There was one place at the bend of the road where she came so near to upsetting us I was scared. And as she looked back it seemed as if she was laughing.

The old lady received me in a pained way as I packed the dwarf on my back and dumped him down on his bed. "I don't know where he got the liquor," I said; "I just helped drive him home."

"I know," she said wearily. "It's the God-damned saloon-keepers. They let him have it, though they have been told by the police not to. Anything to make a dirty dollar. Oh, he's broken my heart long ago!"

I got the bottle and gave it to her. She poured the liquor into the dirt. At that time I was not hostile to hooch and it hurt to see good whisky wasted. However, it happened to be rye. If it had been Scotch I could not have avoided a restraining hand. So feeling that I had done a good deed, I turned out the mare and went home.

Next day the dwarf appeared at the shack. "The bottle," he said eagerly. He was trembling and if ever a man needed a drink he did. When I told him what had happened he burst into a torrent of

abuse. Then he turned his wrath on the old lady and his face was murderous. His hands clutched as if he would like to have her by the throat. I was afraid and had a sense of tragedy. For the next few days as I passed their cabin after dark I would watch for a light in the window. I reflected, however, that with his tiny arms and childish hands he could scarcely do her harm. Still I had a feeling of foreboding and I said to myself: "This is going to end badly." It did, but not in the way I feared. It was old Hank who told me the sequel.

"I was talkin' to the old lady, who was skeered about him, when we spied the mare trottin' up the trail. She turned in at the gate. Then I saw that there was no one in the wagon. Wonder she didn't knock down that gate-post. Well, I drove her back over the road, and where it makes a bend, I found him in the ditch. The marks of the wheels were halfway down the bank. He was dead all right. He'd been drunk and gone to sleep in the drivin' seat. Curious thing, there was a dent in his skull like the blow of a shod hoof. And as I lifted him the horse put up her head and whinnied like she was laughin'. Sounded like she was downright glad. Well, she had reason to be. And say, it may be a notion on my part, but I reckon that old mare jest took her revenge."

Old Hank was mighty decent to me. He taught me how to make bread and I became the family baker. Good bread needs good kneading. We used yeast cakes to make it rise, and it was always an anxious moment watching the oven. Sometimes it rose too much and threatened to invade the floor. Sometimes it was sadly flat, but we would eat it all the same. I also learned to build a fire, using a sliver of pitch, whittling and strips of pine. In a minute I would have a hearty blaze, and in ten more a flaming back-log. A fire was a grand comfort, as it was often bitterly cold. In my bedroom I might as well have been in the open air for my breath froze on the blanket.

I kept thinking of the Sun-land. It was a new dream for me, and I lived for the day when I could make a stake to take me there. In the meantime I got Hank to tell me about California, where he had lived many years. He was garrulous and I was a good listener. Bent and bearded, his pipe was rarely absent from his mouth, and he was constantly relighting it with coals from the fire. He had four brothers who looked like apostles. Hank was the black sheep. He had been a bit of a Casanova, and still nosed round certain bitches of the settlement.

When not reading I roamed the woods with my rifle, bringing home grouse and pheasants. One had to shoot them on the head, so I often missed; but I bagged enough to keep the pot boiling.

Once in a while I would get a deer. However, they were so graceful and innocent I felt guilty every time I killed one. Often, too, I had to pack the meat for miles; yet it was such delicious eating I counted the toil well spent.

One day I followed the trail till I came to a little lake. A trout-stream flowed into it. I had a dream of making my home there. I would have a canoe and a log cabin. I would fish, hunt, raise a few potatoes, and maybe keep a few sheep. There, far from the fever and fret of life, I would live like Thoreau, a backwoods philosopher.

I will always remember the long evenings by the big open fireplace, in the red glow of the back-log. On one side would lie the old dog, on the other the old cat, both the picture of peace. I would try to read, but presently would listen to Hank yarning of his love-life. He had a cask of sweet cider and during the evening he would treat me to a glass.

Then one evening Bung MacTartan came in, and the cider flowed freely. After the fifth glass I gave up, but the other two kept right on. Finally the old man drew a full bucket and vowed they would drink it before morning. I went to bed, but though I slept soundly I could hear at intervals Hank singing *Britannia, the Pride of the Ocean*. They finished the bucket and he slept on the kitchen floor.

Happy days! I exuded health and energy. I used to visit the neighbours, for though I loved my loneliness I had reactions when I craved society. And here I established a contrast between my present and my previous life.

Then I had belonged to the snob side of the settlement; now I found myself a member of the mossback section. No longer did the men with the knee-breeches and the stock ties accept me. I had become almost a pariah. For I found I much preferred the class with which I now mixed. Small farmers for the most part, they had built their log barns and carved their stump-garnished fields from the virgin forest. They were a simple, hearty people. To me they were friendly, though with a certain distrust that I tried to break down. It was the struggle between Canadian democracy and English conservatism, disdain on one side and dislike on the other.

No doubt I antagonized my former friends by my democratic brashness. I wore a black shirt, a white tie and a black stetson. I was playing the part of a roughneck. I dropped my English accent and tried to adopt the vernacular. I even expressed some socialistic ideas, but found about me an absolute ignorance on the subject. The community was individualistic to the backbone, and I realized that any preachments for the betterment of the underdog comes ill from one who is himself an underdog.

I think that even the mossbacks looked down on me as a specimen

of the "damfool English." It was only by my entertainment value that I finally was accepted as one of them. Old Hank happened to have a battered banjo and I soon made myself master of it. That is to say, I learned the principal keys and was able to chord while I sang well-known songs.

And here let me say a word as to my musical obsession. Ever since I can remember I have played some instrument. I began as a small boy with the penny whistle. I played *God Save the Queen*, then went on to *Auld Lang Syne*. I found I could play any tune I could hold in my head, so I ranged over the songs of Scotland till I became fairly good at them. When other boys were romping I would stay indoors and tootle on my whistle. I could hear their glad shouts, but as I trilled and warbled I was happier than they. From the whistle I went to a flute, then to a piccolo. From the piccolo I switched to the concertina, which I played for years. With the concertina I discovered harmony as well as melody. This gave me infinite pleasure because I was finding it out for myself. It was crude and elementary harmony, but I felt like a real music-maker.

My musical education was arrested early in life, and—of all things—by a *kiss*. When I was nine I took piano lessons and had for a teacher a spinster who seemed to fancy me. She tried to sit on the stool, and frequently embarrassed me by putting her arm around me. Then one day she actually kissed me. I went away, scrubbing vigorously at my cheek. I vowed I would never go back. I was getting on nicely. I could play *Nellie Bly* with variations, but I dropped the piano from that moment. I sometimes think, but for that osculatory indiscretion, I might have been a real musician.

It was this ability to entertain a crowd that now won me popularity. I was asked to surprise parties and to social evenings. I strummed the banjo and improvised ditties. I sang old songs with familiar choruses. I soon had the company joining in. Community singing is primitive, but among these simple folks, in a log school-house on the fringe of the virgin forest, it sounded cheerful and friendly. Often I would return from these gatherings after midnight. I would set out over a six-mile trail in the pitchy dark. Usually I told my way by looking up at the stars, for the tree-tops made distinctive patterns against the sky. Once, however, I stepped forward and felt nothing under me. I had a moment of fear, wondering how far I was going to fall. I was relieved when I hit bottom about six feet down, for a little further along it was thirty. Arrived home I would throw myself on the floor, roll in my blanket and sleep like a dog.

The winter was hard. There was snow everywhere, yet under the trees it was light and patchy. From the settlement came the music of sleigh-bells, but in the forest the only sound was the rustling of

my feet as I crushed through the low brush and withered fern. The air was as bracing as wine, and after three or four hours of tramping I would return home ravenous as a wolf. Most of all, I loved to tramp the forest in the moonlight. The moon has never failed to make me feel fantastical. I had been a moon-child and now I was a moon-man, answering its call, and worshipping it in the deep glades of the woodland. At those moments I had a feeling of pure spirit, as if I were alone on the planet, alone with the moon. I believe I have spent more time staring into the face of the moon than any other fool mortal.

Often in the evening after old Hank had gone to bed, taking the only lamp, I would sit in the firelight, seeing pictures in the flame. It was then I had an itch to write something, and a sense of frustration overwhelmed me. I could not express all the emotion I felt. I would sit brooding till the fire died down, then creep, still musing, to my blanket. I had a feeling of secret excitement. I did not know where I was going, nor what would become of me, but I had faith that my good angel would save me in the end.

Well, spring was nigh and my happy winter must soon close. Once again I must sell myself. However, it would mean earning money that would allow me to travel. For my mind was made up. I would work hard all summer and in the fall I would go South. I would winter in California. That was my dream, and how it inspired me! I had no fear of the future, only an intense awareness of the present and anxiety to create experience, so that one day I might be able to write about it. As Morley Roberts got his material for *A Western Avernus*, so I would get mine by self-sought adventure. Oh, it was good to be free to shape one's own destiny, and perhaps through one's very failures to forge success!

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## Chapter Four

### COW-JUICE JERKER

I STOOD between still meadows and the sunlit sea. From a high dyke I looked down on a lazy stream and level fields. Some were gold with stubble, some brown under the plough, some green with pasture. A herd of Holstein cows was grazing peacefully. It was to keep these within bounds I was mending fence with hammer and nails. Ideal work . . . with a big blue sky, a wide horizon, a briny breeze from the sea. Such a contrast from the farm in the settlement or the shack in the forest. In my choice of environment I gratified my taste for variety.

I had left old Hank's in the bright of the morning, and caught the wagon to the local creamery. On it I slung my pack and mounted beside the driver. Often we would stop at roadside platforms, where I would lift on heavy cans of cream. When we got to the creamery I slung my pack on a wagon going in the opposite direction. It was some five miles to my destination, and the way went downward to the sea. I was happy to think I would be near it again. . . . I was going to work on the biggest ranch in these parts. It lay on a delta made by two rivers. The alluvial land had been dyked in, so that it formed a stretch of rich black soil with not a stick nor a stone anywhere. Sloughs intersected it and the grass was salt with the breeze from the bay. A grand place, where one could breathe lustily and enjoy a sense of freedom.

When we stopped at the farm building, my driver, a lanky and laconic lad, said to me: "It'll be two bits for carrying your pack." I was surprised. Usually folks were helpful. I said truthfully: "I haven't got two bits. I haven't even got two cents. I'll give it you when I get my first pay." He said: "All right. I don't want to be hard on you." I thought: A pretty mean kid to be on the make so young. However, that kind get on in the world.

I was shouldering my pack when a red-haired young giant passed. He hailed me in a friendly way. "A new man? Come on, I'll show you the bunkhouse." He spoke with a Scotch accent and said his name was Fergus Ferguson. I told him of the boy on the milk wagon. He was very indignant. "The little son-of-a-bitch! Don't you pay him." "I sure will," I said, "just to make him ashamed."

The bunkhouse was in the upper story of a frame building. The river ran close to it. There were a dozen beds made of rough lumber ranged on each side, and in the middle a round, sheet-iron stove lying in a nest of ashes. Said Fergus: "Better take the bunk nearest the door. One of the boys has feet that stink. Now fix yourself up. Dinner's at twelve. You needn't start work till after."

I flung my pack on a mattress of sacking stuffed with chaff. "No," I said, "I'd like to start right away."

"Well, come on. You can help me unload a wagon of hay."

So while he forked up great wads of hay, I spread it in the mow. It was my first spell of hard work for what seemed ages, and I was glad when a Jap cook struck the gong for dinner. Getting pans of water from the river, we washed and went in to eat. The fare consisted of roast mutton and potatoes, bread and butter, rice pudding and tea. The men, to the number of eight, bolted their food and hurried away to have a smoke and a rest. Of the hour allowed them for lunch, only a quarter was devoted to the actual meal.

I ate heartily, hurried to the bunkhouse, and got into my overalls. Then I interviewed the boss. He was dark, compact, quiet but authoritative. He said: "You might help Fergus mend fences. It will give you a chance to look round." I was grateful, for the job was the pleasantest imaginable. The work was light and we could talk at will. In the bright, breezy meadows I felt happy.

Big Fergus had been there for some years and, though he had no real authority, was regarded as head man. He was a striking figure, six feet two of stalwart manhood; red-headed, blue-eyed, fresh-skinned. He had been brought up on a Highland farm, but had longed to see life. Socially he was superior to the other men, from whom he kept aloof. The reason he chose to work there year after year was that he was in love with the daughter of a neighbouring rancher. She was the belle of the district and had many admirers, most of them of the remittance-man type. Poor Fergus had little chance against these young sparks; but he kept doggedly on, glad of an occasional glimpse of his lady love.

As we worked he told me of the other men on the ranch. "They come and go. Lots of them are wasters, but the present crowd is pretty good. It would be fine if it wasn't for bickering and jealousy. There are two Irishmen, one from the South and the other from the North, who hate each other. There are two Ontario boys who dislike a third from Quebec. There are two Englishmen, one an army man, the other from the navy. Both drink hard, and they're only here till they make enough money to go on a binge."

Milking began at six, and we finished at seven. After supper most

of us were free, so we threw ourselves on our beds and smoked and talked. No one seemed to read, but some wrote letters.

In spite of my fatigue, I slept badly the first few nights. I tossed around uneasily and imagined I must be over-weary. On the fourth evening I lay on my bunk, feeling I wanted to read something that would take me away from this sordid environment. So I took from my dunnage bag a copy of Rossetti's sonnets. You may imagine me there, grimy, sweaty, tired with toil, in that primitive bunkhouse, reading Rossetti. I saw the others looking at me curiously. No doubt they thought me a queer fish. A ranch hand reading poetry might seem to indicate a man in a false position. He should, perhaps, have been lecturing on Shakespeare, instead of shovelling cow-dung. But I did not realize this. For the time being I was a manipulator of manure, and Rossetti was only a passing reversion to a previous existence.

Well, as I was reading a famous sonnet, enjoying it with a starved sense of beauty, I saw what looked like an animated flax-seed run across my page. I drew the attention of my neighbour to it. "By gad! a bloody bedbug," he said disgustedly, and he squashed it right on top of my sonnet, so that for years after I could see the rusty stain.

Then there was excitement among us. Each was examining the chinks in the woodwork of his bunk, and there were exclamations of relief as it was discovered that mine was the only one affected. But in its cracks and joints were hundreds of carnivorous creatures, breeding, and battenning on me as I slept. Disgustedly I took up the bed and, with the help of Fergus, dumped it in the river. How I joyed to think that my persecutors were perishing in that icy flood! Then getting my blankets I spent the night in the hay-barn; and next day, out of raw lumber, I made myself a new bed.

And now let me sketch my workmates:

### *The Two Englishmen*

A study in contrast—one tall and ruddy, the other short and sallow. Both were mystery men and booze hounds. Tom, the tall one, had been a stock-broker's clerk in London and had gone off to the Greek war. He showed me a bullet that had been dug out of him. He did not say from what part of his anatomy, but when I suggested a fleshy one he gave me a dirty look. He afterwards went to South Africa and was killed in the Boer War.

Bob, the second, suggested a fallen angel. He had a Byronic face, with dark, furious eyes. His manner was vitriolic and he gave the impression of a killer. He looked so desperately reckless no one

dared rouse his anger. He treated us with contemptuous indifference, repelling any attempt at familiarity. There was a hint of the aristocrat in his manner, and it was said he had been an officer in the Navy. If so, he had been dismissed for dipsomania. When last I saw him he was a waiter in a cheap restaurant; but I do not think he held that job long, for I heard him saucing a customer over the freshness of the halibut. He refused to recognize me and slung my hash at me most haughtily. After the usual row with the boss, both of these men vanished in an odour of whisky.

### *The Irish Couple*

There, too, we had a physical contrast. Mike, the man from Ulster, was tall and gangly. He had a sense of humour, but was cranky of temper. Patsy, from County Cork, was diminutive. Although over seventy, he was the best worker on the ranch. He was close-knit and quick in his ways, but he had an evil tongue. He was a master of poisonous insinuation, always trying to set one man against the other. He had small, sneering features and malignant eyes. He was the star milker, though a very dirty one. The sweat used to drip from his brow into the pail; and to strip a cow, though his hands were filthy with manure, he would flip them into the milk. Yet how he could make it foam in the bucket! He liked to get the private ear of the boss, when he would lie and sneak on the others, trying to curry favour by this means. Yet every Sunday he would shave, dress, and go to Mass three miles away. He was the only Churchman among us. When he returned he looked almost venerable—silver-haired and fine-featured; but who could guess the malice lurking behind his sly smile?

I had only one row with him. At times he would throw aside the mask and lash out viciously. I was the occasion of one of these outbursts. He was slavering like a mad dog when he finished. I said quietly: "Look here, Patsy, I'm not going to waste words on you. I'm too sorry for you. You know, I've been to college. I'm not a doctor, but I know enough about medicine to tell you *you're doomed*. You have only two years to live. In that time you'll die in great agony." My manner was tragic. I pointed my finger at him menacingly. He stared at me, and I was surprised at the effect of my words. "What have I got?" he gasped.

"*Sarcoma of the duodenum*," I answered. I did not know what it meant, but it sounded terrific. I went on: "In two years from now you'll be rotting underground. Why should I answer the abuse of a man whose tongue will soon be eaten by worms, and whose heart will be filth and corruption? No, Patsy, I wish you no ill. I only pity you. Go and pray to your God to save you from the hell-fires that threaten you."

I left him speechless, and from then on he was a changed man. He became so meek I was sorry for him. He even went to Mass during the week. It may seem strange, but he believed me. Remember, however, he was a very ignorant Irishman, religious and superstitious. Moreover, he had a reverence for knowledge. I would tell him little scientific facts which he would repeat to the others with personal authority and pride. With all his faults, I came to have a liking for him. But the point is—he did die in two years' time. And it was a stomach ulcer that finished him. I only hope worry over my words did not bring it on.

An accident caused the death of the other Irishman, Mike. We were unloading hay with the hay fork and I was driving team. We had got down to the last forkful, when he jabbed the fork too far, so that it clamped around the hayrack. Then he yelled to me to drive ahead. The horses were mettled and, at a word, threw themselves into the stiff pull. I saw them straining unusually hard; then I heard a shout. The hayrack had gone up with the fork, and Mike was clinging to it. The next moment he fell off.

The fall hurt him badly and he had to be helped to bed. He got up in a few days and tried to carry on, but death was looking out of his eyes. He was a parsimonious man, who hated to spend money on clothing, yet one day he bought an entire set of woollen underwear. He was also a man who never washed. His legs were incredibly caked with dirt, but he cleaned them before donning his new underwear. Then he announced he was going to the hospital. His face had a look as if he belonged to another world. I don't think he minded dying so much as paying the cost of dying. He wrote, saying he had a hip-joint disease and would like to have news of the farm. Would someone write? I'm afraid none of us did. He passed alone and unfriended, and the dollars he had lived so hard to earn went to pay the expense of his dying.

### *The Three Canadians*

The first was Ted. He was a grand worker but very cantankerous. At different times he quarrelled with us all. He would be ever so friendly; and then, for no seeming reason, he would flare up. I realized his touchiness, so one day, after an eruption of rage, I said: "Look here, Ted; you're a fine chap. I like and admire you very much. But you have a temper that is hard to control. I can make allowance for that; but, as far as I am concerned I think you should be more reasonable. I only want to be on good terms with everyone. Life is hard enough without bickering. I have so much respect for you that I refuse to quarrel with you."

My speech took the wind out of his sails, and from then on we

were the best of friends. Like most of us, he had one thought—to save money. That was not strange, for every cent represented sweat and servitude. So when he left he had seven hundred dollars to his credit. Some years after, when I was working in the bank, he came to deposit money in his savings account. He was in overalls and top-boots. Out of consideration for him I did not reveal myself, but when he had gone I looked at his account. The balance showed several thousand dollars, so that I need not have worried about embarrassing him. I had a nice suit on my back, but it was not paid for.

The second Ontario lad was of such promise he probably ended up as a Member of Parliament. He was without education but had brains for two. In the field planting corn we would have arguments that developed into debates, and he always got the better of me. When we had finished and I said: "You win," he would say: "Well, would you like to take the opposite side?" But I had had enough. An excellent worker, he did with ease things I accomplished with difficulty. He left, after a row with Ted, and I did not see him for some years. Then he was on a Pullman, looking like a million dollars. He said he was in the real estate business. I am sure nothing could keep him back.

The last of the *pukka* farm hands was from Quebec, but he was more like a drummer than a slinger of cow-dirt. He was always wanting to trade and generally got the best of it. He spent scarcely any money, except on stamps, and would write letters every evening on business schemes. He was fair at his work because he had been brought up on a farm, but his heart was not in it.

At that time the Edison phonograph had just been developed, and a model had been put on the market to sell for about fifty dollars. It had wax rolls and a huge horn. I suggested that he buy one and tour the country with it. He jumped at the idea, and I composed a handbill beginning:

RALPH RAWLINSON'S

### GRAND GRAMOPHONE ENTERTAINMENT

and so on in showmanship style. He liked my laudation of himself as a gramophone impresario so much that he at once ordered one. He really had to live up to that poster.

Then he disappeared for a time, and when he next breezed in he looked trig and prosperous. He held a show in the local school-house and with a grand gesture gave us free seats. He was inclined to be patronizing to us poor land-grubbers; yet his evening was only an artistic success, for he admitted he had barely cleared expenses. I have no doubt he prospered, for he was as sharp as a weasel and had been as much out of place on a farm as I was. Some years after,

he wrote to me, saying he had married and was manager of an express company in St. Louis. He seemed very pleased with himself. However, I never answered his letter; for I was on the up-grade myself, and was even more chesty.

I have dwelt at some length on these members of a gang of ranch hands because I believe that the most ordinary people can be interesting. But while I was studying them, I wonder what they were thinking of me? A crazy guy, no doubt. Otherwise, why would he be scribbling in that black note-book every night? Or reading that poetry stuff when he might be snoring like the others? . . .

I can still see myself in that squalid bunkhouse, under the low, shingle roof, writing painfully but with a sort of ecstasy. The table was ramshackle, the lamp smoky, my seat a nail keg. From the gloom about me came snores in various keys. I alone was awake. As I paused to inhale the stink of sweat and filth, I mused: "Life is queer. Is this I, this tired youth in dung-caked overalls? What am I doing in this sordid place with these clodhoppers who think I am a crank? Not one of them has a trace of culture in his head. Yet are they any the worse? Nay, they are better; for they are paid twenty dollars a month, while I get fifteen. True, I can read Heine and Verlaine in the original, but I cannot plough a straight furrow. They have never heard of Marcus Aurelius, but they can milk two cows to my one."

Something was wrong with me. Or was it only that I had taken a false turning? A man who could soar to the sky had no right to sink to the mire. Was it too late to save myself? . . .

*Well, I, too, must join the snoring oafs, for soon will dawn another day of toil and sweat. My eyes are stinging with weariness. I throw myself down on my straw, and wrapping my blanket around me, still wearing my sweaty shirt, I sleep like a dead man.*

"Come on, boys. Spring yourselves. Are ye goin' to sleep your lives away?" It was old Patsy, jerking himself out of bed, and pulling on his ragged overalls. Then an alarm clock would ring, and Fergus would snarl: "Christ!" and stifle it. I would be the last to rise, all fine thoughts and revolt gone out of me, nothing left but wretchedness and self-pity in the cold, grey dawn. Then, one by one, like a line of convicts, we would seek the misty bush and get in the cows. We would chase after jangling bells and stumble through wet brush. When we got the last straggler in we would be cold and sopping wet. Then came the milking in the dim barn, the swishing of the milk into tin pails, the muttered curses of one of us as a cow tried to kick him over; the shuffling of hoofs, the munching of hay. Then carrying the milk to the cream separator. As the poorest milker I

ran the separator, and was in consequence always late for breakfast. It consisted of porridge, an egg fried with two strips of bacon, bread, butter and coffee.

Having finished, we went to the boss to get our work assignment. So far the day had been detestable, but there was hope for the forenoon. We might be given an enjoyable job. The hoe is a happy instrument; so is the hay fork, while the scythe is best of all. One could recite between the tall corn rows, or sing a-turning of hay cocks. Stooking grain was not so pleasant, for a hot breath issued from the sheaves, and thorns would suppurate in the hands. There were jobs one tackled with gusto, exulting in the response of trained muscles; and jobs, back-breaking and shirt-soaking, that made us conscious of our servitude.

Curiously enough, a not unpleasant job was working with manure. You lever it out of the pile and fork it on the wagon. Then there is the drive to the field, when you sit on the load and enjoy doing nothing. Arrived at the field you dump the stuff in piles or spread it around. I was doing this with Fergus and having a good time. We would take eight loads a day, so I figured the job would last a week. I liked working with him and was quite happy. Then one day he forgot to take his fork to the field; so there we were with a wagon heaped high with cow-clabber, and only one fork to spread it.

I offered to lend him mine, but he would have none of it. He was a conscientious chap, and he knew I would simply look on as he forked out the load. He was annoyed, but to my amazement he began to use his hands. Scooping up armfuls of the dark dung he threw it over the field. Soon he was in a terrible mess and swearing worse than I had ever heard him. The more it fouled him the more savage he became, tearing at the muck and scooping viciously into its slimy depths. It was relatively clean and honest cow-clap, but the way he scrabbled into it was quite repulsive. He was sheathed in it; he seemed made of it, a horrid emanation of manure. And at this very moment who should float into the scene but the lady of his dreams. She was riding with a young dandy of a remittance man. She was very beautiful, with her hair in a fair cloud down her back. She was costumed and gloved to perfection, a picture worthy of Rotten Row. I was gazing at her with admiration, when suddenly I thought of Fergus.

He looked up from the manure he was hurling, and two great chunks were suspended in his hands. As he saw her his eyes registered horror, but he was too paralyzed to drop his beastly burden. "Smear it over your face," I muttered; "then she'll maybe not know you." And he did, though not intentionally, for he made a fumbling attempt to lift his cap with his arms full of manure. She should have looked disgusted, but she did not. Worse, she giggled. Then she



went her charming way, and I heard her and her cavalier chortling as they vanished.

"She laughed at me," said Fergus. "Did you not hear? She laughed." He had gone pale and there were tears in his eyes. It was tragic. His long romance was ended. She could never love him now. After that he scarcely spoke to anyone. He was harsh and bitter, and only his great height saved him from the resentment of the others. And after the threshing he left, never to return.

I had a little romance of my own, which might have ended unfortunately. When there was an extra job of weeding we would hire Siwash. Sometimes I was told to go with the gang in a vain effort to speed them up. They allowed me to forge ahead with the hoe; but instead of shaming them I only aroused their derision, and they went their slow, malodorous way. I really tried to keep ahead because of the fishy stench they diffused.

On one side of me I had a klootch with a papoose tied to her back. It had been born only a short time previously. One morning she had come to the field looking very big. Then she had retired to a ditch and had her baby. After which she had asked to be given her hoe, and go on with the job. On my other side was a young half-breed girl called Minnie. She was quite pretty and excited my ardour till I saw her buck eyeing me sullenly. He was a young Indian known as Johnny Fat. I did not take him very seriously, and I am afraid that my advances to the girl may have been rather marked.

After lunch I was dozing in the hay, when from the loft above there darted a hay fork. It just missed my tummy and circled my thigh. There it stood quivering. Very quickly I disengaged myself, and going over to the group of Indians I saw that Johnny Fat was not among them. After that I left his girl alone.

Minnie was the daughter of Old Man Means, a member of the Church. When he passed her on the road he looked the other way. In the old days he had taken up with a klootchman, and had written home, saying that he was married to an Indian Princess. Then, after having half a dozen children by her, he had discarded her and married a white woman, by whom he had another family. But none of his white daughters had the glamour of that half-caste girl. There was something tragic about her, a lost loveliness that added to her charm.

There were many good-looking half-breed girls in the nearby reservation, but there was nothing Don Juanish about us farm hands. When a man works sixteen hours a day, it takes all the lasciviousness out of his system. The toiler is virtuous because he has no energy left for vice. It is only during an idle spell his thoughts turn to sex.

Sunday was a blessed oasis in the desert of toil. On that day we had only the chores to do, so that, after the morning milking, I was free till the evening one. After breakfast I would mount to the bunk-room. Fergus would be sprinkling and sweeping the floor. A week's dirt had to be cleared away. He assumed responsibility for the cleanliness of the living quarters, and seemed proud to do the dirty work. He was also official barber, willing to cut our hair on request. In the precious moments of our Sunday respite, this was quite a sacrifice. But I suppose it satisfied something in him that craved communal leadership.

On Sunday mornings we would shave for the only time in the week. Then we would wash the shirt we had worn for seven days. This we would do by steeping it in water held in an old coal-oil can, and sprinkling on soap powder. All we had to do a few days later was to rinse it in the river. Once a month we would wash our overalls. They would be so stiff with the glaze of spilled milk and cow-dung they would almost stand upright. They were much harder to wash than our cotton shirts, but it was a real luxury to wear something comparatively clean.

On Sunday mornings, lying in the long grass of the orchard, or dreaming by the river, I would feel a returning awareness of beauty. Again I saw with the intensified vision of the artist, and again I felt the craving to turn my emotions into verse. The gorgeous colouring of the autumn foliage moved me to gratitude, and the fruit on the boughs roused in me a sense of thankfulness. But these were only Sunday emotions. On weekdays I had no time to notice beauty or grace. Only with leisure could I get back my rapture in Nature. So more and more I longed for the time when I would be free to relax deliciously, to enjoy the play of light on water, and the apple-green glamour of the evening sky. Soon I would make every day a Sunday, and I would win back my soul.

On Sunday afternoon, after an exuberant lunch, we would snooze delectably, and later on take a dip in the river. There was a good swimming hole, and it was delicious to cool our prickly bodies in the gentle flow. I was the water hound. My running dives from the grassy bank moved their admiration. At that moment I was full of the joy of living, but alas! it was too short. I think in those days I attained my peak of physical development. Although I worked from five in the morning until seven in the evening, I do not remember any greater fatigue than a healthy tiredness, while at night my sleep was abysmal.

The seasons passed like a dream. There was so much to do. Hay-ing, harvesting, the cutting of the corn—all had their charm. Farm work at its best is agreeable, if one has not too much of it. I tried

to regard it as a form of recreation. When I was idle I felt delectably well, and I looked to a long spell of loafing in the near future. For I held the thoughts of the balmy South and the orange groves, till it was like sunshine in the dullest days.

The fall was drawing to an end and winter was threatening. The threshing was over, the corn in the silo. One by one the men left, dressed in clothes they had not donned for months. In my worn overalls I envied them, but thought exultantly that my own time was coming. As I bade them good-bye our friction was forgotten, and I heartily wished them the best of luck. Now I felt an old-timer, so I took the job of sweeping the floor and lighting the fire. There were only four of us left, and the evenings were quietly cheerful.

*Then the rain came.* The sky was overcast, and nearly every day it poured. We wore gunnysacks over our shoulders and top-boots to affront the mire of the yard. I could never reconcile myself to working in the rain. Hour after hour in a steady drizzle took all pretence of industry out of me. Cold and soggy, I slouched and slacked. The hours in the muddy fields seemed endless. We would be pulling and shawing turnips and mangels, or spreading manure, or ditching and wheeling barrows on the dikes. At night I was soaked to the skin, and wrung out my socks, hanging them to dry over the stove. Each day was a reiteration of misery. To rise and pull on half-dried clothes; to yank oneself into damp top-boots and once again to face that relentless rain was indeed a bitter trial. It was dark, too, and we had to light our lanterns as we went to the barns.

*Then came the cold.* We welcomed it because it gave us respite from that ruthless rain. But it only aggravated our misery. In the icy dark we woke shivering, and with numb fingers pulled on our stiff, sodden garments. With stars still in the sky, we got the milk pails and slouched shivering to the barn. Thank God for the blessed warmth of the cows, who bellowed to welcome us. Poor beasts! They were so hungry they tore the hay from our forks as we fed them. The fork handles were like rods of ice, and we chafed our fingers and flapped our arms to keep up the circulation. That was the time I cursed the farmer and all his works. It was "a helluva life." Hurrah for the sunshine and the orange groves! The thought made me dance and sing even in my most discouraged moments. Thank the Lord I was going, soon . . . soon.

It was now November and I felt I could not stick it much longer. In the yard the frost-caked mud was sometimes knee deep. If I were to brave the winter I would need gum-boots, a slicker, a woollen sweater, heavy underclothes. It would take a month's wages to buy them. So, with a happiness as intense as it was quiet, I went down to the boss and announced my intention to leave. As he paid me one hundred beautiful bucks, he told me if I liked to come back in

the spring my job would be open for me. Well, it had been a good experience. I was pleased to see how I had risen to the occasion. I could earn my bread by the sweat of my brow. I had proved my manhood. I was not a little proud, and ready for the next phase in the adventure of living.



BOOK FIVE  
*CALIFORNIA*



## Chapter One

### HALF A HOBO

A MONTH later I was standing outside a cheap eating-house in Seattle. I was seriously worried; for my capital, that brave hundred dollars I had fondled four weeks' ago, was now shrunken to fifty. It was incredible. I had calculated I could live on twenty-five dollars a month, and here I was spending twice as much. True, meals cost a quarter, and a room another two bits. A dollar a day should have covered me at the outside. But there had been travelling expenses and luxuries, such as chocolate and oranges. Well, my money had melted, and I was down to what, at the present rate of spending, would only last me for another month. So I went into this cheap restaurant run by a Chinaman. He came forward.

"What you likee?"

"What you got?"

"Stophot-lossiebif."

I stared. A neat little man sitting at the next table intervened. "He means stuffed heart and roast beef. Better take the roast beef."

I thanked him and we entered into conversation. He was a musician, he told me. I have a weakness for musicians, so I was interested. I told him of my frustrated musical ambition, and the story of the kiss. To my surprise he took it in quite a strange way. He had been listening with peculiar avidity and regarding me with queer, hot eyes. As I finished he leaned forward, laying his hand on my knee. "You did right. Damn all women. I hate them!" Then he gripped my hand eagerly. "You poor boy! How you must have suffered."

I was rather taken aback. I have a dislike to physical contact with another man. I am even an anti-handshaker. Lots of Scots are like that. The French will shake hands with you a dozen times a day if you will let them. But this was not an honest grip between man and man. There was something in his hot clutch that gave me the creeps. However, I chided myself for my revulsion. He looked such a nice little fellow, grey-haired, fine-featured. His clothes, though well worn, were neat and quiet. So I put down his gesture to an impulse of sympathy.

"What instrument do you play?" I asked.

"Any, all. . . . I am a variety artist. But come and hear me. I will play for you."



Half protestingly I followed him to a large attic in a cheap lodging-house. The room was almost filled with the stuff of his act. On a draped table various instruments were arranged. There was a single-string fiddle, a saw, a series of crystal tubes, a Russian mandolin, a Greek guitar—never had I seen such an array of bizarre instruments. They were beautifully finished and made a dazzling display. The table was covered with red velvet, while across the front, embroidered in gold, I read:

### THE GREAT ZANZINI

#### WORLD-FAMED MUSICAL FANTAISISTE

"There!" said the little man proudly. "How do you like my set-up? Elegant, is it not? But wait till you hear me play."

From his glittering assortment he selected the Chinese fiddle and played Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*. Never did I hear it more exquisitely rendered. Then taking a silver concertina he swung it to the rich harmonies of Handel's *Largo*. Finally he picked up the balalaika and strummed a melody in a minor key.

"*Otchi Tchornia*, my own arrangement. . . . How do you think I play?"

"Divinely. The public must acclaim you as a master."

"They do. I have an offer to go on the Orpheum Circuit. In a few weeks it will be fixed, and then I will have an engagement for the season. . . . Only, I want an assistant."

"You should have no trouble finding someone."

"Not so easy. He must be musical. He must attempt to play and burlesque it. Then I take over. Let me see your hands. . . . Hum! Fine hands, but spoiled by hard work. Have you ever played?"

"Not much. I have a good ear, but I can't read music—not fast, that is."

"That does not matter. Well, I am going to make you an offer. Will you be my *stooge*?"

I did not take kindly to the word. In my mind the stooge of Destiny was enough for me. He saw my distaste and went on eagerly: "You can travel with me all over the States; then Europe, South America, Asia. My act is cosmopolitan. You can live with me in fine hotels. I will pay all expenses, and even give you a small salary while you are learning."

"Learning?"

"Yes. I will teach you to play like me."

"But I couldn't do that if I lived a hundred years."

"Wait. . . . Listen."

He took up a midget violin. It was scarce longer than his palm. One would have said it was a toy and there was no music in it. But

in his hands it became a magic source of melody. Entranced, I listened to a lilting, vivacious air.

"*The Czardas of Monti*. How do you like it?"

"Marvellous!"

"Well, in six months I can teach you to play that baby fiddle as well as I do." Emphatically I shook my head. "I can, I tell you. You do not know music, but you have ear. You only want sensitive hands. I will make them that. Yes, you will learn to play this same piece on this fiddle, but *on nothing else*. You will play it night and day till you cannot help doing it magnificently. And it is all you will ever play on this instrument."

"And the others?" I asked.

"The same with them. You will concentrate on each. You will learn only one piece on each. It will take you months of effort, but in the end you will arrive to do it marvellously."

"You mean to tell me you only play one piece on each?"

"For show purposes it is not necessary to do more. The audience applaud; they encore. I turn to another. Again I give a superb performance. The audience cheers. With a smile of mastery I select a different instrument. Once more I prove myself a virtuoso. Why not? For months I have practised that particular piece till it has become almost mechanical."

"Kind of phony, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but it works. The audience can never suspect my brilliance is a triumph of tenacity. Oh, it can be done, I assure you. In three years I will teach you to play as I do."

"And what then?"

"Then I have an idea for a new show. I will direct you in it. It will be called Music of All Nations. You will have the bagpipes, the banjo, the Spanish guitar, the Alsatian accordion. You will play each in costume. It will be a huge success."

"Why not do this for yourself?"

"Because I grow old. One day I must retire. And because I like you. I want you as a companion, a friend."

Somehow the prospect did not impress me. I was sorry for this man in his loneliness, but he had something about him that curiously repelled me. As he went on, his hot, hungry eyes were fixed on my face.

"You will come? You will be my successor? You will carry on the name of the Great Zanzini? I will teach you all the tricks."

The last work stuck in my gorge. The rest of it—travel, a musical background, comfortable living and, above all, the atmosphere of the music-halls—I would have loved that. But there was something slimy about this small musician with the hot eyes, something mysteriously soul-destroying.

"Will I have to perform with a red nose?" I asked.

"Well, yes; with a false nose. But I will give you a beautiful costume, all silk."

I shook my head. The idea of playing even a pierrot did not appeal to me. But it was the man himself who repelled me. As I retreated to the door he laid hands on me, and somehow his touch filled me with loathing.

He came close. Gazing at me eagerly, he said: "You will come with me? You will hand me my instruments. You will make funny noises on them. I have a line of patter you must learn. We make the audience laugh. Then in the midst of their merriment I come in with a lovely piece of music, rendered to perfection. From the ridiculous to the sublime as it were."

He tried to paw me, and I thought: If he gets too familiar I'll soak him a good one. Then suddenly he began to cry, and clutching at me, begged me to accept his offer. I thought he must be crazy. As I released myself I sought to placate him. "I'll think it over," I said.

I was still thinking it over when I stopped in front of a shipping office. On a big poster I saw:

SAILING TO-DAY FOR SAN FRANCISCO

S/S MARIPOSA, Fare One Dollar

A one-legged man was picking his teeth pensively as he regarded it.

"What's the catch?" I asked.

"Ain't no catch. They's a rate war on."

"Mean to say I can go to 'Frisco for a dollar, grub and all?"

"Sure. They gotta feed you. Jist go in an' plunk down a buck. But you better grab the chance. To-morrow it might set you back ten times that."

Then he regarded me with sudden interest. "Say, Brother, you couldn't stake me to a ticket? Geez! I could get a swell job down there. Pay you back pronto. I'm a slide-trombone player, a grand artist."

A musician and a cripple. I was always a sucker for musicians. Besides, who could resist helping a lame dog over a stile? I handed him two silver dollars. "Get two tickets."

He looked longingly at the money; then hobbled into the office and threw down the coins. The clerk served him sourly. He came back, handing me both tickets. I returned him one, saying: "There you are, Partner. Good luck to you."

I looked at the pasteboard in my palm. It read: "San Francisco, transportation and board, one dollar." Could any Scotsman resist

that? Even if I hadn't wanted to go, I reckon I'd have bought that ticket anyway. Then I had a bright thought.

"Say, there's an old fellow living in the annex of the Golden North Hotel wants what he calls a stooge. He's a musician too. If you change your mind about going to 'Frisco you might get the job."

There! I had pacified my conscience. I had offered Zanzini a substitute. So I bid the one-legged man adieu and hurried to the hotel. It was already four o'clock and the boat was billed to sail at six. Quick work! I rolled my belongings into my blankets, slung the pack on my back and started for the wharf.

I did not see my one-legged friend on the boat, but at the last moment he came down to the dock. He was being supported by another man, for he was very drunk. He collapsed on a pile of lumber, when his friend left him and hurried aboard. I met the man at the gangway.

"Isn't your partner coming?"

"No, he sold me his ticket for half a dollar and got plastered. Says some sucker paid his fare, but now he's going to get a swell job in a music show. Well, it's me gets the trip to 'Frisco for half a buck. Can you beat it?" He looked like a hobo, and there were dozens of his kind packing the deck. As few of them had any baggage, I thought it might be prudent to go below and secure a berth. Extra bunks had been built into the steerage quarters, so that they filled the centre of the cabin. There were three tiers of them, and there were four in a row. A narrow passage on each side allowed access.

A shifty-eyed steward held out a blanket to me, and pointed to an outside bunk. "It's the last I have," he said insinuatingly. "You don't have to climb over another guy to get into it." His eyes said half a dollar, so I coughed up and took the blanket. Then I installed my baggage and went on deck. Somewhat derisively a big crowd was cheering our departure. As I looked at the hundred or so hobos who were my fellow-passengers, I was not surprised at the jeers. Ours was a tough-looking crowd, but the gang on the dock looked even more hard-bitten. They, too, would have liked to winter in the sunny South, but lacked the humble dollar to take them there.

When we had cast off, and I descended to the cabin, I found my blanket had vanished. The same steward was offering one that looked suspiciously like it to another passenger, and pocketing another fifty cents. However, knowing I would get no sympathy, I made no fuss.

As I went on deck again, I realized that we were going to have a tough trip. For a long time I sat in the dark watching the shore lights and feeling a sense of destiny. But I had no misgivings. I was beginning to see a definite design in my future. Instead of waiting

for adventure I would go to meet it. I would seek experience so that I might write about it; and the more colourful it was, the more arresting would be my copy. Probably at the base of my cheerful outlook was my sense of physical fitness. I weighed a hundred and forty pounds and was keen and hard-muscled. Whatever might be in store for me, I faced it without fear. And it was with some elation I realized that I had partly achieved one of my ambitions. For if not actually a hobo, I was at least one of a hundred hobos.

I also realized that I was going to be very sick. The sea had roughened; the boat was wallowing. I thought I might be better lying down, so I sought my berth. I found a big Swede occupying it, and when I pointed out his mistake he very grudgingly rolled over. All the rest of the trip he kept rolling, usually over me.

But as I lay down I had no sense of relief. We were packed like sardines, and the air was so thick you felt you could slice it like Camembert. The man below me had already thrown up his supper, and the one above me was beginning to do likewise. It seemed every one of these hundred passengers was busy voiding his stomach. The Swede alongside joined in the general chorus of eructation. As he heaved himself over me I was afraid he was going to lose his self-control; but fortunately he made the passage-way, and there he puked prodigiously.

Then I, too, had my moment. It was all the more violent as my stomach was empty. Several spasms left me limp and gasping; and, with around me a mob of retching men, I probed the depths of misery. So utterly exhausted was I that when the vomit of the man above me splattered on my face, I had not the energy to turn my head away.

At last I must have slept; for when I became conscious again, the packed space resounded to the snores of my bedfellows. The sour stench was nauseating, and as I stared at the bottom of the bunk above me, in some strange way it seemed to be animated. After a while I saw the effect was caused by crawling crowds of cockroaches. They were dancing a quadrille on the underside of the mattress. They were not like the broad, black roaches of Roselea Terrace, nor the bathroom beetles of hotels. They were a smaller, livelier variety, the colour of milk chocolate. As they were of various sizes, I calculated all members of the family must be represented in that cockroach cotillion. They were running up and down the supports of the bunks, and I realized they were descending to the banquet hall below. We certainly fed them generously. It was nice to think that from our very misery countless creatures were being made so happy they were dancing a saraband of delight.

In the early dawn I struggled from my bunk and slithered down

the corridor to the pure air of the deck. What a relief! Suddenly I noticed a gentle warmth in the wind, and a balmy quality in the breath of the sea. So I sat there, feeling less forlorn.

All next day I recuperated. I even tried to eat a meal. What kind of food, I wondered, would they produce for the price? Well, the steak might have come from the rump of an old bull. Shoe leather would have been more sympathetic. The potatoes were the kind we feed to pigs, the rice the quality reserved for chickens. With some diluted canned milk I managed to get down a few mouthfuls, then retired in disorder.

After all, one couldn't expect much for a dollar. The Company was giving it away. Still, I would be glad when the voyage was over. So I dashed down to my cockroach companions, collected my stuff and spent the night on deck, lulled by a soft wind and cradled by a gentle sea.

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## Chapter Two

### BARBARY COASTER

I SAT on a bench in the Plaza looking at the Stevenson Memorial. It had been unveiled only a month before, but, save myself, no one seemed interested in it. During the hour I sat there, only three people read the inscription. Of those who gave it a passing glance, I do not think one in a hundred had ever heard of Stevenson. The monument seemed sadly out of place in this hurly-burly city, but to me it was the centre of everything. All San Francisco was a setting for that little bronze galleon on its granite shaft.

So I sat in a trance of happiness. In the peace of the pale sunshine I was worshipping at the shrine of my favourite hero. Here, among strangers, in a strange land, was a bit of Scotland. The whaups were crying over the heather, and the dew was white on the peat. This belonged to *me*, not to these people about me. It was so quaint and incongruous it seemed a mistake. Yet to me it was the most precious sight in all that proud city. In this quiet square, amid the fever and tumult, I dreamed by the hour, and seemed to find my soul again.

For of all cities this had been the one that most kindled my imagination. Bret Harte, the Argonauts, the gold rush, had romanticized it for me, and here I was, one of its familiars. It had not then any rich, literary tradition, but even as I dreamed in the sunshine of the Plaza, one was in the making. Young men were beginning to shape careers of distinction. Gelett Burgess, Wallace Irwin, Frank Norris, Jack London, George Sterling, Ambrose Bierce, Joaquin Miller, and W. L. Stoddard—what a galaxy! Yet as I lingered wistfully by the Memorial, I knew nothing of them; and I hardly think they would have wanted to know a blanket-stiff, idly dreaming, while his few dollars melted away.

I was living in a hotel at the base of Telegraph Hill; but it cost me half a dollar a day and I could not afford that. So I moved over to the Latin quarter, where I got a big, bare room, with a French family. It was furnished chiefly with a four-post bed, draped with white curtains. It was the bed that tempted me. It looked so voluptuous, I agreed to the price of two dollars a week.

On the first night I tossed around a good deal. On the second

I slept restlessly. On the third night I awakened just as the dawn-light was coming through the window. I stared at the curtains of my bed. I had been of the opinion that they were of plain muslin, but now they seemed to be printed with a pattern of flowers. Then I saw that the flowers were swaying gently, and the pattern was always changing. Anxiously I watched it for a little. . . . There was no doubting my eyes. The curtains were embellished with a moving design of bedbugs.

I arose disgustedly. Now I understood my fevered sleep. I was being battered on by hundreds of bloodthirsty insects. As I looked at my beautiful bed, I cursed it heartily. What could I do? No power could make me get into it again. So I lifted the mattress, brushed it carefully, and laid it on the tiled floor. I took a blanket and pillow and, after examining them closely, I arranged them on the mattress. Lastly, taking the water jug, I made a ring of water around them.

Thus islanded, I could defy my tormentors. I laughed as I saw them crawl on the floor till my watery rampart thwarted them. Yet even then one of them managed to get at me. It bit me viciously on the point of my big toe. I think it must have climbed to the ceiling and dropped down. Such pertinacity surely deserved a drop of my blood, but I killed it all the same.

I slept the rest of the week in the same way. It was of no use complaining. The people of the house spoke no English. However, I was determined to stay out my time, for I had paid in advance. What I would have done the following week I do not know, had not fate intervened and switched me to a new field of activity.

I spent a month in San Francisco, and got to know it quite well; for it was much smaller than now, and easy to cover. I explored it from Nob Hill to the Mission, from the Barbary Coast to Chinatown. The last intrigued me so much that I spent hours loafing in its alleys and courts. Memories haunt me. . . . An emaciated old man, lying on a couch preparing pipes of opium. He offered me one, but a few puffs satisfied me. . . . A brothel where white girl dopes catered to Chinamen and chased all others away with foul curses. . . . Theatres, restaurants, joss-houses—to me all wonderful in their novelty. I lived in a state of exhilaration and excitement. I was terribly happy and, though alone, I had no fear of the future. I might be down in the gutter, but I had faith in my star.

Then there was the colour and vivacity of the water-front. I watched the Portuguese fishermen unload their boats. I had beers in saloons, where the scum of the Seven Seas draped the bar. Often a boarding-house tout would accost me and tempt me to ship away. Sometimes it was a whaler, sometimes a sealer, but always to northern



waters. If it had been a pearling schooner to the South Seas I would have gone. Once I nearly did go. In the paper I saw from an advertisement that a crew was wanted for a barque trading to Tahiti. I went to the address given. It was a saloon where the barman was sweeping out the dirty sawdust of the day before. He told me in a surly way: "You're just too late, fella. She sailed three hours ago. But have a drink on the house. She's not the only one. There's a Captain coming along to collect a crew for the Bering Sea. Why, here he is."

The Captain was in a cab with two men. They were both drunk. The Captain looked a brute. He tried to get me into the cab, but I refused. I said I would show up before sailing and sign on, but that night I stayed away from the Barbary Coast. There was a lot of shanghai-ing, and if I had accepted the barman's drink, I might have another tale to tell.

I got to know the dives of Kearney and Market streets. There for ten cents one could buy a beer and see the show. The girls were box-workers who came on the stage and sang nostalgic and sentimental songs. All they made was a percentage on the drinks. They would get a man into a box, and coax him to buy wine; then, when he was too drunk to know better, a gooseberry vintage would be substituted. When the time was ripe, they would draw the curtains of the box, and go through him.

One day I was sitting in a dive on Kearney Street having a glass of beer. It was early, and there were few customers, but in the box overhead I heard shrill laughter and grunts of protest. The girls were "going through" a drunken sailor. Then something dropped from above and almost struck my feet. It was a five-dollar gold piece. I looked up and saw a struggle going on behind the red curtains. Then more money tumbled down, silver this time. I made a grab and got my hand full of sawdust; but somehow, in the midst of it, I suspected there was good coin of the realm. So I rose and departed. I did not even finish my beer.

A little way down the street I examined my handful of sawdust. Besides the gold piece I found a silver dollar, two half-dollars, and a quarter. I thought I might see the sailor and return him his dough, so I passed on the other side of the street. Two girls and the coon waiter were on their knees groping amid the sawdust. Then the nigger saw me and I fled.

I did not, however, entirely profit by my ill-gotten gains. I had been warned that some time I would fall for a confidence game, but I had scoffed at the idea. No one would fool *me*. So the following day I was loafing down Powell Street, hoping I would meet that sailor, when I saw a flamboyant sign over a shop-front;

## THE PENTALUMA MONSTER

## THE WORLD'S GREATEST MARVEL

## ADMISSION ONE DIME

Feeling rich for the moment, I joined half a dozen spectators inside the show. We saw no monster, but instead we were treated to an old optical illusion—a girl whose body seemed to end at the waist. She was pert and pimpled and answered the showman as if she were unaware of her physical disability. I was regretting my dime when the barker said, in a whiskified whisper: "Say, if any of you gentlemen sports would like to see a show more intimate and exciting, you'll be well pleased if you wait a little."

Next to me was a well-dressed man of an engaging countenance. With a frank and cheerful smile, he turned to me: "I've half a mind to stay. It's liable to be hot stuff."

"I'll go with you," I said. But the barker wanted another dime to let us pass through the mysterious curtains at the back of the shop. I hesitated. However, my companion immediately produced the coin and, not wishing to seem a piker, I followed suit. We found ourselves in a small booth. At a table sat a woman. She had a pencil in her hand, and she welcomed us with a sweet smile.

"Sit down," she said, indicating two chairs beside the table. "Now gentlemen," she said briskly, "show me your hands." My companion instantly held out his, and she grabbed it. I was surprised, but before I could prevent her, she seized mine and held it in a firm grip. I waited wonderingly. Then, to my amazement, pointing with her pencil, she began to read the lines of our hands. She was holding both, his slackly, mine very firmly. As I have always had a contempt for palmistry, I tried to withdraw my fingers, but she clung to them tenaciously.

I looked at my companion. He seemed intensely interested, as with growing indignation I listened to her rigmarole. In his case it was very pessimistic; but when she traced my lines she became enthusiastic, predicting all kinds of good luck. However, my disgust only deepened and I was glad when she released me. A dime wasted, I thought. I turned to go, but she prevented me, saying: "Gentlemen, my fee for reading your hands will be two dollars each."

I could scarcely believe my ears. I was beginning to laugh derisively, when to my surprise, my companion dug up two dollars and gave them to her. He said: "By Golly, that was fine. You told me so many things that were absolutely true. Madame, you're simply marvellous."

It was my turn to dig. They were both looking at me expectantly.

I was going to refuse, but once again I did not want to seem a cheap skate before this well-dressed individual. Reluctantly I dipped into my pocket and produced my five-dollar piece.

"Give me the change," I said sullenly. But no. Again she grabbed my hand. "Just a moment. There are some things so interesting in your hand. I must have another look. It's simply fascinating."

So she went on repeating her rubbish, till I finally checked her. "That's enough," I said, snatching away my fingers. Then she said: "My fee for the further reading will be three dollars." Suddenly I saw red. I roared with rage. "I never wanted you to read my hand. The stuff's all hokey, anyway. Here, give me my money back, or I'll shoot up the joint."

I made a movement to my hip pocket. I had no gun; but so many packed them, how was she to know? In any case I had a mad moment that might have ended in violence. She was intimidated.

"All right, if you want to cheat me I'll let you off the fee for the last reading." She then handed me three dollars, and I left the place. The jolly man accompanied me across the street, talking with enthusiasm. "Wonderful woman! You know, I was terribly impressed. She told me I was getting a divorce from my wife, and she was right. I think I'll go back and get her to tell me some more. I'd like to know if I'm going to get that divorce." So he went back and joined the new crowd that the barker was inducing to enter. I should have gone away, but the place fascinated me, and I thought with rage of my two dollars. And that evening, as I passed the joint, I saw my portly friend emerging.

"Seems like you belong here," I said nastily.

He sneered: "Get out, sucker, or I'll sock you a good one."

"All right, but I'm coming back for my two dollars."

Next day I bought a knuckle-duster in a pawnshop. I do not think I intended to use it, but it took my fancy. "I'll put it on anyway," I thought. "It might be useful in an argument." All that day I walked back and forth before the shop. When a crowd collected I would tell them the show was phony, and keep them from going in. Several times the barker threatened to rush me; but as he was a small, fat man he thought better of it. The last time I queered his pitch, he went inside and came out with the portly man, whom I now sized up as the boss. He said: "What d'ye want?"

"My two dollars."

"You scram, or I'll beat you to a pulp—see?"

Again I moved off, but the threat rankled. I felt my honour was at stake. Drinking a beer in a nearby bar I told my story to a sympathetic street-sweeper. He said: "Say, why don't you have a slug at the bozo? I would, if I got jugged for it." He worked on my feelings, so that I felt it was up to me to do something. We had

another drink, and I went around to the show. They were doing a good business, and soon the big-jowled man appeared. When he saw me he came over to where I was standing. His manner was gentle, almost placating.

"You here again? What's the idea?"

"My two dollars."

"Oh, all right. I'll give them to you."

He took me by the arm and conducted me to an alley at the end of the block. I actually thought he was going to pay me, and felt kind of forgiving. His voice was oily as he said: "Well, here's your two bucks." He swung at me twice, right and left. The first caught me, but I dodged the second. Then I swung up with my right hand that had been in my pocket. To my surprise, I got him clean on the jaw. It was a great crack, and he went down. Then I made a bolt for it.

When I was safe away, I looked at my hand, and what should I see but the knuckle-duster. "What d'you know about that?" I said. "If I'd remembered I had that thing on I wouldn't have hit so hard. Hope I didn't break his jaw. Well, I guess I won't go back to apologize."

Incidentally, I never ran into the drunken sailor, but as I hunted for him I was getting the colour of my surroundings. I was becoming tough, using the language of the roughneck, and behaving like one. However, I had moments when I reverted to gentler days and ways. Then I would go to the Stevenson Memorial and muse. In these moments, I felt the spirit of the Master, and the urge to write possessed me. I thought: "If only I had a few hundred dollars, just enough to take a room and put in it a table, a chair and a bed! There I would live on bread and milk and make stories of this port." Everywhere was colour and romance. Adventure lurked around the corner. Men carried guns and used them. In water-front saloons sailors fought with knives. In many a brawl on the Barbary Coast I saw blackjacks wielded with crushing effect. Around me was a roaring city, exultant in its ribald brutality. As I read the Stevenson prayer I realized that here was fortitude, but little delicacy. Yet one did come across it.

I was looking at a bookstall where pirated volumes of Stevenson, Kipling and Anthony Home were on sale, when I heard a soft voice addressing the shopman. "Have you anything by Maurice Barrès?"

I said: "You can get Barrie, but not Barrès. He is not published in a translation."

"Thanks," said the man dryly. "I prefer to read him in the original."

With that we fell to talking of modern French literature, of

Huysmans, Catulle Mendes and Verlaine. To tell the truth, I was quoting George Moore for the most part, but it was a literary conversation in which I held my own. He was pale, unshaven, bohemian, in fact, everything I would have liked to be. He told me he was a free-lance writer, just making enough to rub along. He sometimes got a story in one of the Sunday Supplements. How I envied him! To write, to write, even if I starved. . . .

For this city, so vibrant with vitality, inspired me as never did another. I was so ardently in love with it, its lustiness, its colour, its exotic blend of East and West, that I forgot the danger of my own position. I felt serene, for in its lowest dens of depravity, I could read Omar Khayyám, and dream of beauty. Then one day I awoke, stared at my last ten-dollar bill, and said: "Young fellow, where are you going to?"

■

## Chapter Three

### TUNNELLER

AS I mournfully surveyed this last barrier between myself and destitution, I had my first feeling of fear. For I had seen so much of the misery of a great city, its derelicts, its down-and-outs, that their degradation filled me with disgust. Soon I would be one of them. Frankly I was scared.

So I took to reading the Wanted Labour ads in the paper, and I was reassured—till I turned to the reverse side, and found the Work Wanted ads equally vehement. Then I took to haunting the employment agencies. These were sordid places, packed with seedy men, though some had money in their pockets. The latter came to gloat over the thought that they did not need work, and triumphed over those who did. But this morning the smug look on their faces had given way to one of eagerness. For it was in the office of Murray and Ready, and Murray (or maybe Ready) had just written something on the blackboard:

#### LABOURERS WANTED FOR LOS ANGELES AREA

#### TWO DOLLARS A DAY

Now this had two attractive features. It was in the sunny South, and the pay was good. Even the work-weary began to take notice; and I, too, felt a thrill of interest. The crowd was being ushered in, so I partnered with a husky fellow and entered the private office. Murray (or perhaps Ready) was seated there with a simian-faced little man, who failed to impress me favourably. There was another, however, who did. He was big and jolly, but he had come about another matter.

"I want a handyman, half coachman, half gardener, for two old ladies. The pay will be twenty-five dollars a month."

Said Murray (or Ready): "I guess I can suit you." Going into the outer office, he returned with an elderly man, white-haired and stooped, who spoke very humbly: "I'll be quite honest. I'm just out of hospital, but I've got most of my strength back. If the job's not too hard I think I could fill it. I sure would do my best, and be mighty grateful for the chance."

The jolly man shook his head. He might be sorry for this poor chap, but it was hardly fair to two aged ladies to take a chance on him. So the old fellow sadly departed. Then the big man turned to me.

"How about you, my lad?"

Here was one of those cross-roads of destiny. If I had said: "Okay, boss, I'm on," my whole future would have been different. Probably I would have wedded and settled down on the land. To-day I might have a small farm and a big family, poor, but I hope honest. But it was not to end like that. Perhaps I was sorry for the old man, and thought I was doing him out of a job. Perhaps . . . well, I found my lips framing the word "No," though I really wanted to say "Yes." Someone else seemed to be speaking for me through my mouth. In any case I refused a job that would have suited me very well for one that proved to be a bit of hell.

Meantime my partner and the simian man were having an argument.

"Why can't you get men in the South?" my husky friend was saying.

"We don't want fellows who wear gloves and smoke on the job."

"What are the conditions?"

"We pay two dollars a day and deduct seventy-five cents for board. We pay transportation, but the cost must be deducted from the first wages earned."

The husky man took from his hip pocket a big wad of bills. He laughed heartily. "Look at them greenbacks. I don't have to work for a while, anyway. To hell with your job. You can stick it up your assiduity." Still laughing, he loafed out of the door.

I could not afford to be fastidious, so I said: "I'll take the employment you offer."

"Right. Be at the Southern Pacific depot at nine to-morrow morning."

So behold me launched on a new adventure. I did not know where I was going. None of us did. We speculated on the nature and the location of the work, while the monkey-faced man collected our blankets and checked them through. This was to prevent us jumping the train on the way. We had a coach with hard benches, but I did not mind, for I sat with my eyes glued to the window. I was fascinated by the landscape and kept thinking: How lucky I am to see this great and favoured land, when I might still be crooking my spine over a Scotch ledger!

At Sacramento there was some excitement. Despite the lynx eyes of our custodian, ten of us were missing.

"What about their packs?" I asked.

"Wise guys. They hain't got none. Jest scrambled. Some of 'em live round here. Well, they have a free trip home for Christmas."

After that our guide kept a closer watch on us. To escape we would have to sacrifice our kit. One of us did. He said to our guard: "You can keep my blankets. They're lousy anyway. And you, too, are a lousy son-of-a-bitch. I won't go on your damn train. There's a bunch of my pals waiting for me in the saloon across the way. So what?" We envied him. As he wished us a hearty good-bye, we wished that we, too, could call our keeper an S.O.B.

When we arrived at Los Angeles, we were met by the contractor who had hired us. He did not seem favourably impressed. However, he kept a close watch, and no one was allowed to leave the station. All we saw of the city was a vague haze, for we were immediately entrained for the country. There was still the same mystery as to where we were going and what we were to do. Already some of the men expressed gloomy fears; but this very mystery appealed to me, so I did not share their feelings of uneasiness.

It was dark when the train stopped, and we were told to descend. The air felt fresh and sweet. I read the name of the little station: AZUZA. Then we were counted, and of the original fifty some twenty had evaporated. So now we were returned our blankets and told to follow our guide. He took us to a small hotel, where we had supper. None of us had ever been in this town before; in fact, few of us had any idea where it was. But as we marched down the street the inhabitants seemed hostile. Several times I heard the phrase: "Bloody strike-breakers."

One said: "Why do you fellows want to come and take the bread outa our mouths? They's all the help they need right here." Another: "They're sending you up to the Canyon. Well, I'm sorry for youse guys." After that we did not pry any more into our fate. We preferred to hope for the best, and get a good night's sleep. But the latter was more difficult than we had imagined. As the number of rooms was limited, we were asked to double up. This I refused to do. Not with these stiffs anyway. So I waited until the last and was allotted an attic room. The pretty waitress who had served me supper had given it up to me. Her dress hung on the door and, in an atmosphere of cheap perfume, I regretted her absence.

We were awakened early next morning and served breakfast. After which we were asked to pay a dollar for the hotel. Some swore they had no money, so our guide paid, telling them it would be deducted from their wages. On this, some of the others disappeared, till now there remained only a score of us.



Outside the hotel were two stage-coaches on which we were told to load our packs; then we climbed on top. The stages were just freighting wagons. The driver wore a ten-gallon stetson, and had a blond moustache and a goatee. He looked like a figure out of Bret Harte.

"Well, boys," he told us, "you're goin' up the San Gabriel Canyon. It's goin' to cost you a dollar; but when it gets too steep, you'll jist have to get out and walk."

We had, too, and often. Not only that, we had to push the wagon, for the road was only a trail. Ever so frequently we would cross the San Gabriel River, when we would all pile on the wagon to avoid getting wet. For over three hours we kept going, mounting higher and higher into the mountains. The air took on a quality of champagne, so buoyant and bracing was it. With every turn of the trail the scenery grew lovelier. The river that riffled in its rocky bed was crystal clear, the hills were covered with wild thyme and murmurous with bees. The sheer beauty of the scene made me forget our uncertain goal and, though I began to be fatigued, the excitement of the adventure sustained me. By noon we reached an open space in the canyon, where work was going on. Here, it seemed, was our destination, for the stage-driver addressed us: "Grab yer packs, boys, an' come through with a buck."

Some protested, and there was considerable argument, with Monkey-face insisting we pay. He had now become very unpopular with us, and with reason. For we suspected he was getting a rake-off from the employment agency, the hotel-keeper, and the stage-coach driver.

"There's something phony about this outfit," said a red-haired youth. "They can take my dollar out of my pay. You mark my words, they're playing us for suckers."

A little after noon we were told we might go to the mess tent and have lunch. Steve, the stage-driver, and others had finished, and came out, picking their teeth and belching. We had been hanging round ravenously, but the Mexican cook was not sympathetic. He had not been advised of our arrival and resented us. However, he scraped up a feed which consisted of beans and bacon, crackers and honey. I devoured it wolfishly. The honey was delicious. I piled it generously on my crackers and felt better.

Our bunkhouse was in course of construction, so some of the boys voluntarily took a hand in its making, fetching boards and nailing them to the frame. The lumber was fresh sawn and full of sap. Uprights for the bunks were erected, so I selected some of the softest boards and finished off my bunk. There was not material enough for the roof, but I did not mind. I would be able to stare

up at the stars. I might be broke, but when it came to stars I was as rich as a millionaire.

I had now a chance to look about me. The canyon was wildly beautiful. Our camp was on a small plateau between the river and the mountain. From it a cable ran to a terrace on the slope above. The only buildings were the mess houses and some administration offices. In a large tent was a stable with several horses and some stacks of baled hay. I saw the red-haired youth giving the last a speculative eye. "Stand by this evening," he said, "and we'll snitch a bale or two." When it was dark we sneaked into the tent and emerged with a bale each. The gang in the bunkhouse received us with enthusiasm, but in the ensuing distribution I got less than my share. That night I turned the boards of my bunk, hoping to find a softer side, but there was none.

Supper that evening consisted of cold pork, potatoes, rice and prunes. I had a craving for fat in that keen air, and ate the pork with avidity. It was of inferior quality, yet I was not inclined to be critical. I enjoyed the thought that, since leaving the ranch, these were the first two meals I had not to pay for. Of course, I would pay later on, but sufficient unto the hour is the evil thereof. That was my favourite sentiment in those days, and expressed my general attitude towards life.

The night was bitterly cold. I donned all the clothing I possessed, yet felt a human icicle. We were awakened for breakfast, which consisted of mush and condensed milk, bacon, beans and coffee. Then we lined up before the foreman, and were assigned to our jobs. He looked me over, saying: "Hullo, Sailor. Oh, don't try to deny it. I know from the cut of your jib you've scrambled from some ship. Well, we don't want to pry into your affairs, but shell-backs don't make good shovelmens. It's either the tunnel or the gravel pits for you, so Jack, me lad, you better go up to the tunnel."

He seemed a pleasant man, and I thanked him for his consideration, while insisting I had no nautical pretensions. The tunnel opened on a small shelf on the mountain-side, about three hundred yards above the camp. A cable had been erected to take up supplies, so four of us crowded into the bucket and were hauled slowly to the platform. On the way I got some idea of why I was there and what was awaiting me. It was my workmate who enlightened me. He was pale, and his clothes were strangely rotted in places.

"We're part of a scheme to supply water power to the valley. We're tapping the San Gabriel River high up in the canyon and bringing the water down through tunnels and ditches. Our bosses are a firm that specializes in concrete work. They have a contract to cement the face of the tunnel that runs through the mountain

spur above us. The tunnel's half a mile long, and we're now half-way through. Oh, you'll know all about it soon enough."

He spoke grimly, so that when we arrived at the tunnel mouth I was none too enthusiastic. On the platform half a dozen men were mixing gravel and cement and loading it into wooden boxes. Each box weighed about a hundred and sixty pounds. They were lifted on wooden trucks, four to a truck, and rolled up the tunnel to where the plasterers were waiting. There were four trucks and they ran on wooden rails. My job was to aid another man to load the boxes on a truck and push it through to the cementing gang. There we dumped the stuff and went back for another load.

Sounds simple and easy, just lifting and pushing for ten hours a day. I could dream as I lifted, and make poetry as I pushed. What a delightful job! . . . I don't think. For the tunnel was low and narrow. We had to stoop to avoid knocking our heads against the buttress work. The roof dripped a regular rain. The water lay in puddles under our feet. Soon we were soaked through. The rails were splintered and worn. Often the truck would go off the track, and it took all our strength to hoist it back. Then again the way was uphill, and we had to throw our weight into the effort to push the truck onward. There were switches at intervals where we passed other trucks, and we were timed so that there should be no delay. If there was, it meant trouble. The lighting was by candles stuck in the dirt walls; but the water often extinguished them, so that we had to push and strain in the dark.

I had never before been in the bowels of the earth, and I did not like it. I was so glad when I saw the bit of blue that marked the tunnel mouth. Thank God! I could breathe pure air again. The loading and unloading of the truck was a beastly business. Not only were the boxes heavy and hard to grip, but the cement had an acid quality that bit into the flesh. I soon found one had to wear leather gloves on the job. These cost a dollar and only lasted a few days, being rotted by the wet. For the first day, however, I had to use my bare hands, so that by night they were torn and bleeding.

When I dumped the boxes I learned to do so very quickly. One did not want to hold them a split second longer than was necessary. It was my partner who taught me that. He snarled: "You must love that damned thing to hang on to it the way you do. Why don't you kiss it good-bye?" He was stronger than I, and suspected I was not putting all my weight into the propulsion of the truck. I was really pushing for all I was worth. But I was a lightweight, and he was a big fellow. Still, I felt I was letting him down, and the feeling between us was rather grim.

After what seemed like ages the lunch hour was announced. The

last trip was finished. There on that dizzy platform, in the pure air, I felt suddenly faint. The mountains reeled around me, and only by sitting down and closing my eyes did I get a grip on myself. I thought I would cave in and felt horribly ashamed. However, the weakness passed, and I stepped into the bucket with the others.

So exhausted was I, I could scarcely eat lunch. With what horror I looked forward to the afternoon! I felt like quitting right there, but I was chagrined to show myself so poor a specimen. Feeling better after the rest, I again mounted to the tunnel. How I got through the rest of the day I do not know. Perhaps because it was hourly nearing its end I stuck it out. I think I was light-headed; I know that at three o'clock I began to dream of afternoon tea and toasted crumpets and a nice novel and a theatre in the evening. At that very moment I might have been enjoying such a programme. Why had I renounced it? What a fool I'd been, I thought with bitterness. How sweet that time was! . . . Well, the last load was run. Drenched through, covered with cement, my hands bleeding, my limbs aching, once more I tumbled into the bucket.

Immediately after supper I went to bed. There, lying on the boards, my thoughts were painful. I was feeling the yoke of the earth-god, and cruel it was. But it was too late to regret. I must go forward to whatever destiny awaited me. . . . Thus thinking, I fell asleep for ten hours, and such was the vitalizing effect of that pure air I awoke determined to carry on.

I held down my job for ten days. I wore out several pairs of gloves and gradually got used to the work. Most of my time was spent in the darkness of the tunnel. I knew nothing of the radiant sunshine and the murmuring of bees. I saw little of the blue sky. When I went to work the sun had not appeared, and when I quit it was dark. No convict could have deserved a worse fate. Then one night I went to descend in the bucket.

"Cable's broken," I heard a voice in the dark. "You gotta climb down the gully."

"Broken! Anyone hurt?"

"Two mixers dumped. Lot of bones broken. Don't reckon they'll pull through."

I knew the men and realized that if I had quit a little sooner the trip they had taken would have been mine. I shook my fist at the accursed tunnel.

"You black bastard, I'm through with you," I said. Next day I went to the foreman.

"Shiver my timbers, my hearty," he sang out. "What's the ill wind?"

"I'd like to be put on one of the gravel gangs."

"Right you are. I was just going to shift you anyway. Sailors are

no good underground. Well, get yourself a shovel and make the dirt fly."

After the hell of the tunnel it seemed like heaven in the gravel pit. Under the brave blue sky I swung my shovel with enthusiasm. I saw the river purling over the pebbles. I heard the birdsong and the bees. I felt rapture . . . for a few days. Then I realized how relative happiness is. For the horror of the tunnel no longer blinded me to the gruelling drudgery of the gravel pit. We began at seven in the cold grey dawn. Often our breath steamed in the frost. But it was bracing, and we worked to keep warm. Then the sun cleared the hills and greeted us lustily. Soon it was dominating the clear blue sky. As noon drew near it broiled down on us. Where we had shivered, now we sweated. At noon we were glad to lay off and hurry to lunch. At one we began again and worked till seven. Around six the sun disappeared rather gorgeously, leaving us in a melancholy twilight. Before quitting time it grew dark, and we had to finish by lantern light. Well, one could not complain. The work was not hard, but, oh, it was so monotonous!

There were three of us on the job. One was a Texan, a long, lank fellow with a high-pitched voice and a garrulous tongue. The second was a Dutchman of short build and a morose disposition. The Texan was Southern in sentiment, and spoke disparagingly of all Yankees. The Hollander was very proud of his citizenship and enthusiastic for the Union. The two had hot arguments. The Texan twitted the Dutchman on his foreign extraction and suggested he was no true American. Once they almost came to blows. I took no part in the conversation, but thought Dutchy was right in most things. In any case he showed me how to save my energy by using my knee to lever the shovel. What I appreciated more was that he excused himself for showing me. When I thanked him, he said: "Oh, well, you're a sailor, not a sand-slinger. Every man to his trade."

"But I'm not a sailor."

"We know better. You've run away from a ship. You just don't want to say so." Impossible to convince them. It was my juicy complexion, I suppose.

Dutchy used to go ahead with the pick and loosen the gravel. We shovelled it on an inclined wire screen, and every hour a wagon would come along and take what we had screened. If we had not enough, the wagon would have to wait, and then there would be trouble. Often we had to hustle, especially when we encountered rocks, and the going was hard. The "trouble" was the brother of the boss, a dyspeptic man, who acted as time-keeper. He always criticized the angle of the screen. He had a peevish face, and he would stand over us making nasty remarks. He had a special pick

on Texas, who wore gloves and had a cigarette dangling from his lips. Texas would lean on his shovel, engaging him in conversation, so that he would be obliged to move away. Then one afternoon about three, when our tempers were drawn to a wire edge, he was so mean that Texas lost his temper. He said: "See here, Mister, you're not our boss. You're just a lousy office boy. We're adoin' our work all right, an' we don't want you buttin' in on us. Looky here, you leave off of us, or I'll take down your pants and spank your bottom with the flat of my shovel."

The time-keeper grew purple. He spluttered: "You'll pay for this. Come to-night and get your time."

As he walked away I said to Texas: "There! You've lost your job."

"That's just what I was aimin' at," he laughed. "Now they'll have to pay me off in good hard dough. And won't I make things sparkle? Say, fellers, you know what the day after to-morrow is—*Christmas*. Fancy spendin' Christmas in this God-forsaken hole! D'ye think you'll have a day off an' a special feed? No, you'll go on slingin' gravel like any other day. You'll eat the same old hog-belly and beans. Me, I'll eat turkey an' wash it down with dago-red. Fired! Thank God, I'm fired. . . ."

That night as I arranged my bed I was very thoughtful. I unroped my pack, for, owing to the thieving tendencies of my workmates, I dared not leave small articles exposed. I had lost my fountain pen and my favourite pipe, and I was so afraid of losing my razor I used to slip it into the lining of my jacket. Well, I unroped my pack and prepared for the night's sleep by putting on an extra suit of underclothes, an extra pair of socks, my overalls and jumper. Then, wrapping my blankets round me, I snuggled down in my bunk. The grass grew in the middle of the bunkhouse, and the air was icy pure. Around me the others were sleeping. Outside a full moon flooded the canyon with unearthly light. . . .

It seemed the moon was serenely reassuring me, bidding me rise and go forth. I had a feeling of lightness and flame. Then I felt a surge of gratitude and joy. For I knew I, too, was going to quit next day. This was my last night in the canyon. I had done my final tap of work in this accursed place. Yes, I too would spend Christmas in civilization, maybe eat turkey and drink red wine. Oh, I would be terribly happy! . . .

Poor fool! Little did I know.

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## Chapter Four

### HUMAN DOORMAT

NEXT morning I awoke with an unwonted sense of freedom. I donned my serge suit and, after having a shave, I roped up my pack. Figuring I would have to fast all day, I ate a huge breakfast. Then I went to that nice chap, the foreman.

"I want to quit," I said sadly.

"Now, that's too bad. What's the matter with us?"

"The work's too monotonous."

"Well, it's the first time I heard a man make that complaint about a job. But I suppose you know your own business best."

I wondered if I did. I have often wondered. However, I felt I must escape from this horrible canyon, so I went to the office, where I interviewed the dyspeptic brother of the boss. He received me sourly. I calculated I had worked sixteen days. After deducting board I would have twenty dollars coming to me. Soon, I thought, I will be on the way, twenty good bucks in my pocket. Never had money been more hardily earned. To my consternation he gave me a card with figures written on it.

"There's your time cheque," he said with a grin.

"But what about my money?"

"If you present your time cheque at our Oakland office, you will get it."

"Can't you pay it here?" I stammered.

He sneered nastily. "Yes, if you wait till our regular pay-day. We don't keep any cash here."

"But I have no money. What can I do with this cheque?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You may be able to get it discounted in Azuza." Then he retired to the water-closet and shut himself in. The matter was closed as far as he was concerned.

Dismayed and desperate, I returned to the bunkhouse. I had made a mistake. Like Texas, I should have got myself fired. Now I was out, with only a wretched bit of paper in my hand. I couldn't even eat another meal at the mess house. The men were at work, and I sat a long time in the empty bunkhouse, wondering what I should do. Then, feeling very miserable, I shouldered my pack and started down the canyon.

It was a brilliant morning. Despite my bitter disappointment, hope surged in me. At that age it seemed nothing could get me down. I had seen how low I ranked on the social scale. As a labourer I was little higher than the riff-raff of the hobo world. Because I was penniless, men could use me, abuse me, make me risk life and limb, and at the end kick me into a ditch. I was the underdog, to be spat upon and exploited. . . . So with these cheerful sentiments I went on my way.

Well, it was at least a very beautiful way. Nature did not let me down. Here in the descending canyon, she was at her gayest. She greeted me with joy of leaf and blossom. The sky smiled down to cheer me, and the sun warmed me with a comforting glow. The bulk of humankind might be brutes to such as I, but I still had the music of the birds, the song of the stream, and the melody of the soft breeze. So I took heart again. I was in superb condition and, if health meant happiness, I could afford to sing. And I did. Swinging down the trail I exulted in my youth and my fitness. How glorious to be free! Freedom was the finest thing in the world. Money did not matter, except so far as it helped one to health and liberty. And it didn't take much to do that. Oh, I felt very rich as I swung singing down the trail.

Every now and then I would have to wade the river, but that did not dampen my spirits. While I was putting on my shoes after one of these crossings, I saw a familiar figure approaching. It was the youth called Red, who had helped me to snatch the hay. He plunged through the stream without unshoeing.

"I jumped the camp," he told me. "They didn't put me to work right away, so I stalled and said I was sick. But you can bet it didn't affect my appetite. I ate enough for two men and kept on eating. Soon I was owing them a big board bill. They got after me this morning to work it off, so I cleared out. I guess I got ahead of the bastards." I admired him. He should have been in high school, yet here he was, so sure no one would get ahead of him. He was in a hurry to reach town, and as he had no pack, he left me at a swift pace.

I kept on down the canyon, when something extraordinary happened. I had reached a place where it opened out in a small valley, when I saw lying on my path a big envelope. This was crammed with blueprints and tracings, and they had to do with the work in the canyon. After admiring the delicacy and accuracy of the drawings, I put the whole thing in my pocket. I had not gone very far when a man came racing up the trail on a horse.

"You haven't seen a blue envelope?" he demanded.

"No," I said innocently. "Is it very important?"

"Very," he snapped, and went off at a fast lope. I could feel the



envelope bulging in my pocket, and of course I should have surrendered it. But I was at that moment an enemy of society. I thought: Why should I give these people their plans? I would get no thanks for finding them. They played me a lousy trick, and now I'll get even. I'll keep their bloody blueprints as a souvenir.

So I went on, patting my breast pocket contentedly. But I was now furiously hungry, and the outlet of the valley was near. Then to my great joy I came on my first orange grove. For long I had been looking forward to this moment. Up to now I had never seen one, and here, out of the grey valley bed, this grove burst on me in all its green glory. Plucking several oranges I began to eat. I noticed that they were rather green and far from sweet, but I was so famished I kept on eating.

The sun was setting as I came into the open above Azuza. Sitting on my pack, I enjoyed that conflagration of colour. Then the stormy rose and gold died into orange serenity as a man came up the trail toward me. He was etched against the sunset, a strange, Silenus-like figure. In his arms he carried a demijohn, and he zigzagged from one side of the trail to the other. When he drew near I saw he was old, with a long beard and hair to his shoulders. Putting down the demijohn he regarded me benevolently.

"Come on, son, drink up. It's a poor heart that never rejoices. I'm eighty-five, but thank the Lord I can still get drunk. God gives me strength to enjoy his good wine. Have a swig, son." I tilted up the demijohn, and he followed suit. The wine had a cheering effect. I was weary a moment ago, but now I had fresh courage.

"Come up to the cabin and have a bite of supper," begged the old man. "You know what to-night is—Christmas Eve. It's the birth of the blessed Saviour, and we ought to celebrate. Come along, we'll make a night of it." But I was in no mood for a carousal, so I begged him to excuse me. Then we each had another drink; and, holding hands, we sang *Auld Lang Syne*, dancing around on the trail. After that, he went on his way uphill, while I descended to the town.

My wine-born ecstasy was brief. My vivacity vanished, and it was a weary, dispirited traveller who limped into the dusky burg. But the lights blossomed to welcome me, and I saw Christmas trees in the cottage windows. Yet somehow they failed to cheer me. Apart from the lights the streets looked grim and forbidding. Homeless, penniless, I felt like an outcast. Well, not quite; for had I not in my pocket a time cheque for twenty dollars? I went to the hotel, and entering the bar-room, I found the proprietor installed behind the bar. He was a German named Koenig, as hard as flint, but outwardly as soft as soap.

"Have you a room?" I asked.

"Maybe I haf. I do not yet know. Der iss a drunk man in number ten. Maybe he sober up and get out pretty soon. Den I give you de room. You wait and ve will see."

Installing myself in a corner, I sat on my pack and lit my pipe. I would have liked to eat but I had not the price. That reminded me—I had not the price of my bed. I went up to Mr. Koenig: "I have here a time cheque from the company. Perhaps you would discount it?"

He looked at it contemptuously. "I do not do such business. Maybe you try some von else." This was not very encouraging, so I went back to my pipe and pack and tried to figure things out. Soon a group of men came in, and the landlord became very busy serving them beer and whisky. Among them was Steve the stage-driver. There were also two geese that kept coming near and hissing at me. One wore a bow of pink ribbon, the other one of blue.

"De blue iss Hans," said the landlord, "and de pink is Gretel. Dey come from mine farm. I sell dem one dollar fifty each. Beautiful birds for Christmas dinner. I tell you what, I raffle dem ten cents a ticket."

The place was filling up and business was brisk, when a natty little man breezed in. He had a Napoleon Third beard, and a resonant voice. He said: "Boys, I'm a stranger here, but I like your little burg. What about having the drinks on me?" A number of men lined up to the bar. When they had downed their drink, the stranger said: "Now, fellers, what about a lil poker game in the back room?"

A silence. "Looks like a tinhorn to me." I heard a low voice near me. It was Steve, the stage-driver, who answered: "Say, Pard, if you like I'll play you for one of them there geese. Stud poker or freeze out."

"Freeze out it is," said the little man. So the two adjourned to the back room, followed by some of the crowd. Again I was left to my melancholy reflections. I must have dozed off when I awakened with a start. Vaguely I heard the word: "Blueprints." A man who looked like an engineer had just come in. He was spectacled, wore leggings and a leather coat. He was talking to the landlord and some others. He seemed worried and irritated.

"The damn fool must have lost them on the trail. He rode back but there was no trace of them."

"Vos dey important, Mister Schrader?" asked the landlord.

"So important they're holding up the work. We'll have to send to 'Frisco for copies. They were plans and tracings absolutely necessary for the job on hand. It will lose us five days. It's a minor catastrophe."

I tapped my pocket. The plans were there, and it gave me a

secret joy to think I had them all bothered. I, the poor despised drifter, had the key to the situation. "I'll not give them up," I thought. "For sheer spite I'll keep them." Then another idea occurred to me, and I went forward to the group. "Look here," I said. "If I tell you where your plans are, will you cash this time cheque?"

Everyone turned. All eyes were on me. Schrader stared at me; then he took the bit of paper I handed him. He seemed satisfied with it. "Sure I will," he said eagerly. "You just find me them plans, and I'll cash your time cheque."

"You give me your word?"

"I sure do."

I took the envelope from my pocket and handed it to him.

"There . . . I found it on the trail." He examined the contents anxiously. We were the centre of a watching group, and for a moment I felt a sense of importance. At that moment the stage-driver joined us. He was in high glee for he had won his goose. So was the gambler, for he had retained most of the others in a poker game. It seemed to me rather dramatic. All were looking at the engineer to see if he would show me gratitude. Putting the papers carefully in his pocket, he turned to me and handed me back my time cheque.

"I won't cash that," he said truculently.

"But you gave me your word."

"What if I did? I tell you I won't cash it."

He turned his back on me with contempt. I was just another bum to be treated like a dog. But at least I was hard and fit, and I knew how to fight. I was on the point of calling him a son-of-a-bitch, when Steve, the stage-driver, broke in: "Let me see that time cheque." He examined it carefully. Then: "I'll cash it for you, but I'll only give you ten dollars."

"But it's for twenty."

"Can't help that. Ten's all I'll give. And at that I'll have to borrow the dough. Remember, I won't touch the money for another two weeks."

I thought rapidly. It was a bitter moment, but I was desperate. "All right. I'll take ten for it."

He went away and soon returned with a ten-dollar gold piece. The engineer had faded away. The episode was at an end. But it left me with a realization of how helpless I was, and how callous were those about me. I was a bit of flotsam to be spat on, scorned. Well, I had at least ten dollars of food and freedom. As far as that sum went, I could buy the world. The thought heartened me, so that with a new courage I went to the landlord. "What about the room?" I asked.

We went upstairs, and he tried the handle of a door. No success.

"Ach! He iss not yet enough sober, der dirty pig. Vell, come; I gif you some place to schleep."

He led me into the yard till we came to the chicken-house. "Dere. You vill be snug unt dry mit de chickens. You haf your blankets so it does not matter. It iss de best I can do. You vill be all right."

I was too tired to object; I spread my blankets, wrapped my spare shirt around my shoes for a pillow, and tried to sleep. Three feet overhead were the roosting chickens. They evinced their displeasure at the intrusion by angry cackling and proceeded to shed their droppings on me. Then I began to be conscious of an itching sensation. It increased, so that soon I was scratching from head to foot. FLEAS! The dust on which I lay was alive with them. Indeed there seemed to be more fleas than dust. They were not the biting kind, but they hopped on my face, and I could feel them running all over me. I squirmed, I clawed, I cursed. It was no good. They only grew worse. Sleep seemed impossible. . . . Then I became aware of a new misery. Suddenly I had a violent pain in my stomach. Severe cramps assailed me. I gasped. I writhed. I forgot the fleas, for I was alarmed. I thought I was going to pass out, so excruciating was the pain. Then I remembered: *the green oranges*. I had eaten them so enthusiastically despite their acidity. Now they were getting in their deadly work. My misery reached its climax. . . .

A light was shining in on me. "What the hell you doing there?" It was the night watchman. I explained: "There was a drunk in room ten, and I couldn't get in, so Mr. Koenig let me sleep here." He was quite friendly, but I was suffering so from colic I could hardly answer. Presently he went away, leaving me to writhe in the dark. I thought that night would never pass; then the dirty grey dawn filtered in through the wires of the chicken-house, and my feathered friends gave me a fresh shower of droppings. I was sore all over from continual scratching, but the acute pain in my innards had subsided to a dull uneasiness. I got up and stretched myself.

I could not eat any breakfast, but Mr. Koenig charged me a quarter for sleeping in his chicken-house. I was so weak I had no guts to protest. I mention this to show to what a new low my inferiority complex had fallen. If I had had a tail I would have tucked it between my legs. Everyone was handing me a dirty deal, and I was taking it like a yellow dog. I had made mistakes. I should have held up those papers till the engineer had cashed my cheque. Or I should have refused to leave the camp without my money. I might have made a fuss and excited the other men. I was a proper sap, losing my grip like this. Well, I would at least have a short respite. Maybe it would restore my morale. So, feeling a little better, I bought a ticket for Los Angeles.

## Chapter Five

### BINDLE STIFF

ON the afternoon of Christmas Day, a ruddy young bindle stiff swung off a small train at its terminus and walked down a board platform to a wicket gate. He looked at the freight shed and ticket office that formed the station, then stared at the painted name that adorned it. He was rather thrilled. At last he had arrived at one of the cities of his dreams—*Los Angeles*.

"May it be as beautiful as its name," I said, as I crossed some railway tracks. To the right I saw adobe houses and an old Mission. The air was warm and balmy. I had a feeling of friendly greeting, and my heart warmed to this gracious city. Keeping on uphill I came to a square wooden erection. It was of two stories and was built round a central court. The court was green with palms, while a fountain plashed in its centre. On a side wall I saw vivid scarlet flowers.

"What is that plant?" I asked a sturdy little man, who was pacing in front of the house.

"A poinsettia. It's difficult to remember the name, but just think of a pointer and a setter." Then he looked at me kindly. "You've just arrived, I reckon. Looking for a room, maybe. Why don't you stop here? We do."

He indicated a row of oldish men sitting on tilted chairs on the raised veranda, as if that contented elderly ease was a testimonial. To me it was, so, with a feeling of gratitude, I unslung my pack and entered the court. I loved it at first sight. It had balconies all around, and the rooms gave on them. I longed to be a part of such a charming arrangement. I was greeted by a tall, bearded old man, who wore a pith helmet and looked like General Booth. Indeed, I soon learned he was an ardent evangelist. He was also a dope fiend, but he was very nice. He looked me over thoughtfully.

"Yes, I can accommodate you, but I warn you this is a quiet house. We have no use for drinking, and we do not let to women."

"Good behaviour is my strong suit," I said; whereupon he ushered me into a pleasant room on the second floor. It was little bigger than a cubicle, but its doorway gave on the palm court, and its window fronted the city. With a sigh of satisfaction, I threw myself on the bed. I felt at home. And this tiny room was to be my haven for some happy months. In this rickety building, where a skyscraper

now stands, I was to know ease and content. My room cost a dollar a week. I had nine dollars, so that I planned a month of perfect rest. Four dollars would go for rent, and I would feed myself on the balance.

I did, too. I managed to eat on a dollar a week. Here is how I arranged. . . . I would arise rather late, and at ten I would have breakfast. This cost five cents and consisted of coffee and three doughnuts. Eating them very slowly, I would try to imagine they were six. Then, about two in the afternoon, I would have dinner in Smith's Restaurant on First Street, where for ten cents one could buy a five-course meal. It consisted of soup, salad, a meat or fish dish, two vegetables, hot cakes and coffee. True, the portions were not very big, and no doubt the food was mediocre; but to my hunger it was a feast. I was allowed four small slices of bread, so I would select a place opposite a man who was just finishing. If he had not eaten all his bread, I would say: "Excuse me, may I have it?" And he would answer: "Sure, Brother, go ahead." By the time I had eaten my hot cakes, soggy with syrup, I was conscious of a sense of repletion. Then I would go home and sleep for three solid hours. And how I loved that siesta!

In the evening I loafed around the fruit markets looking for an orange or an apple that might have fallen in the gutter. Often I found one and ate it avidly. Then at seven, I repaired to the Pacific Gospel Saloon. This was founded by a widow who was anxious to save the souls of bums like myself. More to the point, she gave us material nourishment in the form of dry bread and coffee. That was what we came for, and to obtain it we prayed and brayed for over an hour. Every night I sang for my supper. The bread was cut in fair-sized chunks, and some of us grabbed two. I was a "twofer." Then one night, being extra hungry, I pretended to be converted, and got three.

In the end, however, I thought out a better scheme. I went to the director and asked if I might help to wash the coffee cups after the others had gone. He was quite agreeable, so for my pains I carried away an extra two pieces of bread. Soon, too, I was asked to cut and serve the bread and hand around the coffee. Except for the praying and singing, which bored me, I felt quite important and happy.

So, for fifteen cents a day, I was well nourished, and all I demanded was that this state of affairs continue. A pleasant life, my masters! Was I not free and without responsibilities? No duties, no grinding toil, no authority over me. This to me was ideal living. So long as I could go my own way and harvest my crop of dreams, I asked for little more. Let me be ever so poor, but let me possess my soul.

I knew now that brute toil was not for such as I. By the sale of my strength I could never hope to survive. I could not pit my amateur muscles against the sinews of the horny-handed wage-slave. I was trying to do something for which I was not fitted. Was I fitted for anything? I began to wonder. I had moments in which I saw disaster in front of me; but for the most part I was buoyant and enchanted with my surroundings. I know this, because I remember I often looked at myself in my mildewed mirror and laughed for joy, I was so round-faced and twinkle-eyed. If I was heading for disaster, I was doing it very cheerfully.

Perhaps my serenity was due to my surroundings. Never was city more conducive to tranquillity of spirit. The Spanish atmosphere still pervaded it. If 'Frisco roused my rapture, Los Angeles drove me dithyrambic with delight. 'Frisco was lusty, frolicsome, strenuous—a man city. Los Angeles was more like a woman, wooing and gracious as its name. To a dreamer like myself, it was heaven. Its bland climate soothed and solaced me. I walked its streets under the feathery pepper trees, the acacias, magnolias and palms, and saw the moon beaming blissfully down, as if she had created this scene of beauty. In any case, she loved it; and, as I have always been moon-crazy, she seemed to bless me too. So I walked miles of silver streets that were like groves, thanking the gods I had lived for this. . . .

Then I discovered the Public Library, where one could pick books from the shelves and read them in tranquillity. I at once sought the poetry corner. It overlooked a court where magnolia trees glimmered in the warm and gentle breeze. Sunshine flooded through the open windows; yet it was always cool, and so quiet that readers, turning over pages, seemed to do so surreptitiously. In that sanctuary of books I felt at peace with all mankind.

San Francisco had made me want to write stories, but this city made me want to make poetry. Day after day I browsed on books of verse. I was more attracted to verse than poetry. However, I wanted to write newspaper poetry, the kind that simple folks clip out and paste in scrap-books. I sent some specimens to the local papers, and they were promptly printed. In one, called *The Hobo's Lullaby*, a line—"My belly's got a bulge with Christmas Cheer"—was typical of my tendency to the coarse and the concrete. Thus early I discovered that I would rather win the approval of a barman than the praise of a professor. . . .

Delectable days! The atmosphere was one of languor and urbanity, and I surrendered to its charm. I read, roamed the streets, made rhymes, and dreamed. Oh, if it could only have lasted! That was my life—to live aloofly, never getting to grips with reality. But money

was the key to my felicity, and mine was melting away. Well, as long as it held out I would live radiantly.

With the other roomers I got on passably well. I dropped my old-country accent, and adopted a Western one. I spoke nasally; I revelled in slang. By the gang with the titled chairs I was accepted with some reserve. Obviously I was an outsider. In the parlour was another row of chairs against the wall, and a greasy band where their heads rested. Every night they chewed and spat into the two cuspidors and discussed politics. Let me sketch some of them:

### *The Socialist*

He was the stocky man who had first accosted me. In my Socialist year I had learnt all there is to know on the subject, and it amused me to hear the same old slogans. Somehow, the dictature of the proletariat bored me now, though I was very much one of them. This man had a powerful voice and was quite a demagogue, but he made little impression on the others. Indeed, they thought him a crank. Though they belonged to the class he wanted to salvage, they were all individualists. I think the United States will be the last to surrender to Marxian nostrums. Anyhow, my friend had no success in his diatribes against the Capitalistic system.

### *The Hypochondriac*

He claimed to suffer from a complexity of diseases and continually complained of his symptoms. He had been under treatment by an advertising quack and had given this man most of his savings. He said: "The doc wasn't doing me any good, so I went to him and pointed a gun at his guts. I told him: 'You got all my dough and you promised to cure me, and I'm worse than when I started. Now let this sink in; it's cure or kill. I won't give you another cent; but if I die, as sure as God made little apples, I'll take you to hell with me?' Well, he got it. Now he's sworn to cure me. Nothing like gunplay to get results." Whether he recovered or killed the quack, I never learned. No doubt he was a little crazy and distinctly dangerous.

### *The Corn Doctor*

He claimed to be a pedicurist, but he also told fortunes by the hand. He went from door to door practising his profession. To give him prestige he wore his hair so long it fell on his shoulders in greasy ringlets. A queer, disturbing man, with snake-like eyes and a dirty tallow complexion. One could have believed him capable of any obscene crime, but probably he was quite harmless.



*The Quartz Miner*

He wore a broad stetson and was the image of Uncle Sam. Every evening he smoked a big cigar and told us of his life in the desert, where he had crushed gold quartz for a living. He himself looked as dry as the desert. His hands were gnarled and twisted, and it was evident his working days were over. Yet he kept saying he must find a job, so we judged his funds were getting low. Then one day the cigars stopped. Then he ceased wearing white collars.

"You see the old miner?" said the Hypochondriac. "He's starving to death. His lips are blue. He looks like a corpse." It was true. His appearance shocked me. Yet he talked boastfully of what he could do and spoke of his prospects of getting a job. Still, he must have realized that no one would ever employ him again, and I could see panic staring from his eyes. He got thinner and thinner; then one day he disappeared, owing the landlord several weeks' rent. I was glad he went away, for his bleak eyes distressed me.

*The Section Foreman*

A more cheerful figure, white haired and portly. He had spent his life working on the railway; forty years of it, grading, ballasting, rail-laying. He had never married, and saved steadily, so that he had now enough capital to last out his days. That is, if he did not live too long. "If I reach the eighty mark I reckon I'm going to be up agin it," he told me. "But I hope to pass on before that. Not that I ain't enjoyin' life. I'm jest adoin' right now what I've wanted to do all my days—nothin' at all." And he did it to exaggeration; for his head was the most constant wall-greaser of the gang.

*The Book Agent*

A young man of about my own age, good-looking and intelligent. He said: "I've been peddling so-called literature, but it's a mean job and I'm not going back to it. Trying to sell goods nobody wants to buy. Showy, trashy books you talk ignorant people into subscribing for. If they buy a book, they think they've got a cultural footing. Last I sold was a *Life of Lincoln*. Most people bought it for the pictures. They were chiefly emigrants. I told them it was their duty to purchase it as prospective citizens. It had a showy, flashy look, but it wasn't worth five dollars. I just hated to take their money."

He proved to be a gentle soul. His only reading was the Bible and Tennyson. He wanted to be a missionary, but had to save a certain amount. "The going is hard. I expect to get a job this spring in Oregon scaling logs. In the meantime I'm glad to make enough for food and shelter. As soon as the orange-picking season opens, I'll find work in the groves."

I used to listen to these men as I sat smoking my pipe in the corner of the parlour. But most colourful of them all was the proprietor himself. Sometimes he would join us, looking friendly and talking a little wildly. Then we knew he had been taking an opium pill. A very ignorant man, he was obstinate in his views and would brook no contradiction. I had an argument with him about the climate of Scotland, which he insisted was arctic. He put me in my place by suggesting I was only a poor specimen of the proletariat. Most of the others agreed with him that I knew nothing about Scotland, though I told them I had spent most of my life there. I imagine they were thinking of Iceland. In any case they figured the boss was a well-posted man, and I was a labour stiff.

However, the old fellow was sorry he snubbed me, and asked me to go to chapel with him. I think it was called The Church of the Bleeding Christ, and is now a tabernacle. The service was punctuated by: "Praise the Lord!" and "Glory be!" by members of the congregation. Then the Parson took the platform. He wore a frock coat with a flannel shirt and top-boots. To show his democratic spirit, twice he stopped and blew his nose with his fingers. After the service I was introduced to him as "Brother Service." His hand was flabby but his breath was strong.

I had gone to church hoping it might lead to a job, for my funds were getting down to zero mark. Fortunately, though The Church of the Bleeding Christ availed me nothing, the Pacific Gospel Saloon proved that it was profitable to move in religious circles. My privileged position as official dish-washer enabled me to carry home a fair quantity of bread every night, and as I had prudently paid my rent two weeks in advance, I was able for a time to live entirely on bread and water.

I had always been curious to study my reactions to a diet of this kind, so I made the most of my opportunity. I found I became light-headed and thought constantly of food. I used to stand for long periods before the doors of restaurants, just to get a whiff of the succulent smells emerging. In my room I would dream of delicious dainties, then eat my stale bread, trying to imagine it was roast beef. The lack of fats bothered me most of all. How I would have enjoyed a bite of raw bacon! As to fruit, I actually found myself scraping with my teeth a banana skin a man threw on the sidewalk. He turned and caught me at it, but I pretended I had picked it up to prevent someone slipping on it. He looked hard at me and tendered me a dime, which I proudly refused.

In those days of semi-starvation, it never occurred to me to write home for help. I would have died rather than confess my humiliating plight. For, as months passed, I began to conceive of myself in terms of failure. I was now twenty-four and saw little ahead but

hard work and poverty. One could afford to waste a year or so when one was twenty, but this was going too far. Perhaps it was due to my half-starved condition, but there were moments when I had a sense of panic.

Fortunately, about this time, I grabbed a small job. One morning I was passing the employment office when the clerk was writing something on the board. It read: MAN WANTED TO CARRY BANNER. I jumped forward, beating the others to it.

"How much for the job?"

"A dollar a day for three days."

"Give me the address."

I hurried there. It was a Jew shop on Main Street, and the owner was going out of business. The banner was made of canvas, stretched on a light wood frame. Printed in big red capitals was the proclamation: RETIREING SALE. I pointed to the mistake in spelling, but it almost lost me the job. The boss, who had printed the sign himself, said snappily: "I ain't askin' for no scholars round this establishment." Whereat I hastened to tell him he was probably right and I was wrong. So low had I sunk that I was not only willing to carry a banner, but to endorse its illiteracy.

Well, it wasn't a bad job. I only wished it could have lasted longer. I wandered up and down the streets, pausing once in a while to rest. I smoked my pipe as I strolled the curbs, forgetting my banner, and dreamily watching the passing crowd. Sometimes I would deviate down to the red-light quarter near the Mexican district; then, fearing my boss would be keeping tabs on me, I hastily regained the less interesting but more respectable streets.

On the whole it was rather fun. I thought of Excelsior, and made a parody on that poem. I also composed other bits of verse, as I paraded my illiterate banner. The job of a sandwich man seems an ideal one for a poet. Maybe many of them are. Only I wished I could have been a real sandwich man, with two banners balanced back and front. Then, indeed, would I have been proud. I suggested it to my boss, and he thought it was a good idea, only he did not think much of my further suggestion that two banners should be worth two dollars. However, the sale was at an end, and the situation with it.

This interlude had once more allowed me to get on friendly terms with my stomach. Again I was able to spend fifteen cents a day on food, and rejoiced accordingly. And my joy was climaxed when one night my friend, the book agent, informed me the orange-picking was beginning, and that if I came with him the following Monday morning, probably I could get a job.

## Chapter Six

### ORANGE-PICKER

AT that time the three principal streets of Los Angeles petered out about where the centre of the city now stands. Where the banks now rear their stately skyscrapers, shacks and orange groves began. From our house it was a bare twenty minutes' walk to the orange belt, so we started out at seven in the morning to be in good time.

I was introduced to the Mexican contractor. As a rule he did not favour *gringos*, but, good-naturedly, he took me on. He was full up with pickers, however, and I would have to be content with washing. There was a long line of inclined racks, and at the head of each was a bathtub full of water. The box of oranges was dumped into the tub, and the washer scrubbed each with a brush. There is an art in even the simplest functions, and there was a great knack in washing oranges. You took the orange in the left hand with a rotary motion, at the same time revolving the brush with the right. Thus, in a second of time you had completely cleaned the skin of specks and dust.

I never acquired this deftness. I was always a box behind the others, most of whom were women. However, as we waited for a new load of boxes the girl beside me would come over and help me. Fortunately she was not a Dolores del Rio, or a dangerous friendship might have developed. I was really very grateful; but she had a jealous husband, so there was nothing I could do about it.

I spent two weeks washing oranges. It was dull work, but not hard, and my average gain was fifty-five cents a day. We were paid two and a half cents a box, while the pickers were paid three and a half cents. Now that I was working, I had to change my eating habits. I took my ten-cent dinner in the evening. In the morning I did without coffee, and bought six doughnuts for five cents. Three of these I would eat on my way to work, and the other three I would eke out with oranges for lunch. In this way I managed to save a dollar and a half by my week of work. It was making money the hard way, and I was bitter and hopeless; but it was better than starving. There were compensations, of course. How keen-set I

arrived for dinner in the evening, and how I enjoyed the Sunday of rest!

Then we went to a new grove, and I was promoted to be a picker. I had to buy leather gloves, for the trees were covered with long, sharp stickers. I was also obliged to purchase a pair of clippers, as we were not allowed to tear off the oranges. This, however, we all did when we were sure no one was looking. Standing on long ladders propped against the trees, we filled the sacks slung round our necks. When they became too heavy, we descended and emptied them into a box.

Orange-picking was ideal work. One was perched high up in a glorious tree, whose glossy leaves fluttered gently in the breeze. The ardent sun was tempered by the soft wind, and every breath was healthful and joyous. As I plucked the golden fruit, often I paused to look around with something like rapture. About me the grove billowed like a green sea, while above me was a blue sky of perfect serenity. I was so happy up there in my leafy world, I hated to descend. Glossy foliage, golden fruit, caressing sun and tender sky . . . what more could one desire? I sang gaily as I worked. I forgot the horror of the canyon. This was a job for a poet. How I wished it would last for ever!

If only it had been better paid. But at the best I could not make more than seventy-five cents a day. Much depended on the fruitfulness of the trees and the size of the oranges. The chief drawback was the heavy ladder one had to swing in place. It was hard to carry and balance from tree to tree. The tree, too, had to be picked clean, and sometimes the fruit was difficult to reach. But these were only trifles. The great thing was to be on one's own, with neither competition nor jealousy. It is true the Mexicans hogged the best trees and made over a dollar a day, but they were entitled to that. They might have resented an outsider like myself; on the contrary, they were kindly and helpful.

As we walked to work in the diamond-bright morning, the air would be bracing to the point of elation. Reaching the grove, I would don my gloves; then, with sack and clippers, climb to my leafy eyrie. What a land! I would think. How blessed the people who lived in it. The most favoured spot on earth. And lucky me! to be here, high in an orange tree, full of health and strength. . . .

And as I write this, almost fifty years later, with most of life behind me, I still think: What a land! I still swear it is the most favoured spot on earth, and that it is a privilege to live here. Every morning in my Hollywood bungalow, I awake to the same diamond-brightness of dawn; the sky shouts to greet me, the trees wave joyously, and the sun smiles its kindly welcome. Old though I be, I feel again the

exhilaration of a boy. I sing on my morning walk. I tense my muscles joyously. I thrill with rapture to the finger-tips. California, bless you; you have brought me back my youth!

Then suddenly this delectable work came to rather a grim end. Among the washers was a white man whom I called the Parson, because he told me he had at one time been a preacher. He was a mean-looking fellow, and who knows what scandal had driven him from the Church? He told me he was suffering from a skin disease, so every day at noon he took what he called a medicated bath. For this he used to retire to a shed, blocking the door during the operation.

Now it happened that the proprietor of this grove was a big bully of a man. He was bearded like a pirate and ordered the Mexicans around like dogs. When he appeared on the scene everyone trembled and slipped away. He used to watch us as we left in the evening, and if anyone carried as much as a single orange, that person was fired. I always had half a dozen nice navel ones; but I kept them hidden under my shirt in the region of my own navel.

Well, this man took a deep delight in hectoring us. He would storm around, seeking for a victim on whom to visit his wrath. So one noon he happened by the shed where the Parson was having his bath.

"What's this?" he roared, pushing at the door. "Who's there?"

"Go away, naughty man," said the Parson, in his high falsetto voice. "I'm having my b-b-bath."

For a moment the boss was speechless. Then in a voice choked with rage he roared: "Come out of there. Come out an' I'll tan your dirty hide." Then ensued a furious struggle, the boss trying to push the door in, the Parson squeaking like a cornered rat. Of course, it ended with the victory of the powerful man outside. He burst in and dragged out the Parson, who was in his B.V.D.'s. He was a little lean man, with mousy hair; and now he was struggling to pull on his pants with the boss dancing round and making passes at him. I enjoyed the scene, while the Mexicans roared with laughter.

"Go away. Leave me alone, you nasty Sodomite," shrilled the Parson, still pulling at his pants.

"Get on your filthy rags," said the boss, "and be damn smart about it. I wouldn't touch you with a pole with dung on its end. What were you up to in my shed?"

"I was having my medicated bath," said the Parson, fumbling with his flies.

"You lie, you dirty rat. You were treating yourself for syphilis. Get outa here, double quick. I'd kick you out only I wouldn't foul my foot with you." And so on, in a vituperative stream, till the

Parson had scrambled into his clothes. Then his turn came, and he let loose in a spate of venomous abuse I have never heard equalled. It blasted, scorched, withered. It reflected back to the maternal relative of his opponent, and besmirched that no doubt excellent woman in an abominable way. He took the words out of his adversary's mouth, and in a climax that was a masterpiece of excoriation, he shrilled: "By the horns of Moses, you stink like the last stool of Judas Iscariot."

This was too much for the boss. He had seemed paralyzed with impotent fury. Now he made a rush, gripped the Parson, and with a kick projected him into the roadway. As he shambled away the Parson shook his fists, while his eyes had the venom of a rattlesnake.

"You'll pay for this," he shrilled. "Mark my words, you'll pay bitterly. . . ."

As he vanished I had a foreboding of calamity, but next morning I went to the grove as usual. From a short distance away I saw a lot of smoke. Then the Mexican foreman met me warningly.

"Better not go near. That smoke you see, it's old man's barn. Him burn down in night."

"That's too bad," I faltered.

"Ya, too bad. But heap more bad. Three Chinaman packing orange, they sleep there. They burn too. Burn like hell." Feeling sick, I turned away. Well, my splendid job was at an end. The foreman would hire no more *gringos*. Indeed the Parson had had his revenge.

So once more behold me available. The book agent had got a job as a checker in a timber yard. He had gone to Portland, and I would have liked to accompany him; but during my work in the groves I had only been able to save eleven dollars. Of course, on that sum I could live for a month in idleness; but I was beginning to get uneasy. I could not continue this shiftless existence. So I put an advertisement in the paper. It read:

Stone-broke in a strange city. Young man. University non-graduate, desires employment of any kind. Understands Latin and Greek. Speaks French, German and Chinook. Knowledge of book-keeping and shorthand; also of Art and Literature. Accept any job, but secretarial work preferred.

There was only one reply, and I went to the address indicated. It was a shabby room in a shabby building. There was a curtain over the glass portion of the door, and I was conscious of eyes peering at me from behind it. Presently the door opened, and a man greeted me. He was short, squabby, and dressed with a seedy flashiness. He had a pasty, crinkled complexion and waxed moustaches.

I did not like the look of him. As he addressed me, his gimlet eyes drilled me through. "I've got the very job for you," he said, after a few preliminary questions. "It's a sort of a tutor to three girls who live with their mother. They want to learn how to talk about books and art stuff. It was that bit in your ad that hit me. Sure you can hand out the dope on culture?"

"I think that's one of the things I can do."

"Well, it's a swell job. Of course, there will be other duties, but the chief one will be to keep them company. They live in a lonely house and want a man to protect them."

"I'm not a Mormon," I objected.

"Nothing like that, young man. You mustn't think you can take advantage of your position. Remember, I trust you, and you must prove yourself worthy of my trust."

"It seems too good to be true."

"Oh, don't think it's such a snap. There's a pony. They want you to take them drives. Can you handle horses?"

"Sure."

"Can you handle a gun? I told you they wanted protection. A knowledge of firearms might be useful."

"Lethal weapons don't enthuse me, but I guess I wouldn't let them down."

"Good. Can you play music?"

"By ear a little. I can strum a guitar and vamp on the piano."

"Can you sing?"

"Well, can't say I'm a de Reszke."

"Fine. You're just the man for the job. Wait a little. I'll 'phone the lady." He left me and I surveyed the room. Its only furnishing was a deal table and two cheap chairs. No, there was another object. It was a large Bible that stood upright on a shelf. Out of curiosity I took it down. But it was only a hollow shell, and behind it stood a fat bottle of whisky. I put the Bible back just as the little man returned.

"It's all right," he chirped unctuously. "The job's yours."

"Fine."

"Only it's in San Diego, and the fare is six dollars, or thereabouts."

I knew there was a catch in it, I thought. He went on: "My commission will be nine dollars. Very reasonable, considering all things."

Nine dollars! Nearly all I possessed. Somehow I felt glad my funds prevented my accepting this fantastic situation. Perhaps the man was a fraud. Maybe when I got down there I would find no job at all.

"Nothing doing," I said.

"You don't trust me. And I trust you," he said.



"I'm not asking you to trust me. Can't you take your commission out of my first pay? Can't they advance me my fare? What are they going to pay me, anyway?"

"Oh, at least fifty a month. The old lady's rich. Money's no object to her." I admit I was a little dazzled. This was just the job I had dreamed of. It might be a stepping-stone to salvation. He went on: "Well, I tell you what I'll do. I'll cut my commission to two dollars." He said this with such a grieved yet magnanimous air that I was touched. The gambler in me was roused. It all sounded fishy to me—but why not take a chance? Columbus took a chance.

"I'll go," I said. "It sounds very mysterious, but I like mystery." So I paid him two dollars, and he gave me a card on which was printed (not engraved) JOSEPH WIDGEON, and on the other side, together with a few words of introduction, he wrote the address:

MADAME AMBROSE  
Villa Lilla  
San Diego

## Chapter Seven

### NO SUPERMAN

THE Villa Lilla was certainly isolated. I had real difficulty in finding it. People whom I asked looked at me in a curious way and eagerly professed ignorance. But at last I located it in a remote suburb of the little town. It was screened off by gum and pepper trees and was a low, mission-like building with a red-tiled roof. I went through an arched gate that was surmounted by a cupola in which hung a red lantern. The effect was pretty and attractive. A pebbled path, bordered by gay flowers, led to a monastic-looking door. It was opened to me by a capacious lady draped in a Spanish shawl. Over her shoulder familiarly peeped the fat face of a Negress. The lady eyed my pack with some disfavour.

"Well, young man, what can I do for you?"

"Mister Widgeon sent me," I said, tendering my card.

"Joey Widgeon! Well, I never! Poor old Joey. Was he sober when he sent you? You know, Aunt Mirandy, old Joey is one of my ex-husbands."

"I guess you was well rid of that one," said the Negress, showing marvellous teeth.

"Well, he was a bit of a heel. We was both troopers in the Happy Hooligan Burlesque Company. Oh, I don't claim we was married with the sanction of the law. Not that time, thank the Lord."

"Me, I been married most times wid de authority ob de passon," said the Negress virtuously; then the two began a long argument on husbands, wise and otherwise, in which they seemed to forget me. At last the broad-bosomed lady said to the Negress: "Well, you'd better get back to your work, Aunt Mirandy, and leave me talk to this young man." Then she turned to me. "I guess that old rascal has been up to his tricks again. You're the seventh he's sent down on a fool's errand. He'll get hisself into trouble one of these days."

"Do you mean to say there's no job?" She shook her three chins mournfully, and I stared with dismay. "But I came all the way down here," I faltered. "And I gave him two dollars."

"You're lucky. Some of 'em gave him five. Anyway, he's played you for a sucker." I felt rather sick. After a long pause I said: "Well, I guess there's no need bothering you. I'm sorry, ma'am; I

sort of liked your home." I shouldered my pack and was turning away when she checked me. She was looking at me with a strange speculation.

"Wait a moment, young feller. I didn't say I couldn't use you. It just happens Aunt Mirandy's man, who usually does the chores around the place, has done and got hisself put away for a spell. You're sober, ain't you?"

"As a judge."

"Lots of judges I knew wasn't. But you look a nice boy. You know, you mind me of the son I lost."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I mean, I'm sorry you lost him. Was it long ago?"

"Twenty-five years." She began to weep, with facile enjoyment, wiping away the tears with the fringe of her shawl. "Well, it's on account of you being so like my boy I'd like to keep you for a spell. Anyway, till that no-good nigger gets outa jail, I need a man around to make hisself useful. I'll pay you thirty dollars a month and board. If it suits you, dump your blankets on the porch, and I'll show you round."

It was a nice place. I thought so from the first. The house was all ground floor, and the front porch was supported by arches. The roof was covered with red tiles. Going round to the back, I saw it was formed like three sides of an oblong. In the space between was a rose garden, with a pool and a fountain in the middle. Red goldfishes were making bubbles on the surface of the water. All the rooms gave on an arched gallery that ran around the back. It had a sort of mission effect, I thought—like cloisters. It only needed some nuns to complete the picture.

Over three doors were stencilled three names: Laura, Lotta and Rose. "My daughters," said the old lady. "I'll have you meet them by-and-by. They're sleeping now, I guess." Then she cried: "Get up, girls, I want to introduce the new substitute for Pete. He's black as the ace of spades, and so cute." Here she winked at me. "There, that'll fetch 'em. Come on now, and I'll show you your quarters."

Beyond the rosery was a very thick hedge. A gate led to a much neglected garden—no credit to the late lamented Pete. Going down the path, we came to a small eucalyptus grove, and the bluey husks littering the ground gave up a pleasant perfume as we crunched them underfoot. In the grove was a great heap of logs to be cut up for firewood, and a stable with a hayloft. One end of the stable was boarded off to make a small room.

"There, son," said the old lady. "Make yourself comfortable. Aunt Mirandy will give you clean blankets. You'll eat with her in the kitchen. You needn't get up before eight, and you can quit

around six. Do all the chores for her; cut the wood, dig up the garden and groom the pony. Come and see it." A piebald pony whinnied to greet us. In the stable was a golden cocker spaniel playing with an angora cat.

"The pony is called Millie. She belongs to my daughter Laura. The dog is a spaded female. She is called Floppy, and belongs to my daughter Rose. The cat is Mercedes, and is claimed by Lotta. You see we all have our pets. Here is mine." A huge turtle was crawling towards us. "I call it Horace, after one of my ex-husbands, who was as slow as a pint of molasses. . . . Well, come and I'll have you meet the girls."

We returned to the house. From each of the three doors, the corresponding girl emerged. All were in kimonos, and looked only half awake. Although they did not show to advantage just then, I could see they were unusually pretty. Laura was a stately brunette, with almost classical features and a lofty expression. Lotta was a red-head with a vivacious smile. Rose was an ash-blonde, very small, almost schoolgirlish, with a demure look. I shook hands with them politely, and they said, "Pleased to meet you," and disappeared into their rooms.

"Mighty nice girls," I said appreciatively. "I'm sure they're a credit to you." She gave me a queer look.

"Funny boy. Yes, they're good kids."

"They're so different," I said. "One would never think they were sisters."

"Well, their fathers were different. All my husbands were handsome men, but their types varied. Variety is the spice of matrimony. Now, you can get your blankets and install yourself. Aunt Mirandy will call you for lunch. Just do anything needs doing. My saints alive! You do remind me of my poor boy that was killed on the railway." She seemed to have taken a liking to me, for she came several times during the day to see how I was getting along. I sawed a log and began to dig up the garden. I groomed the fat pony and played with the cocker. I was feeling pretty happy. Just before dinner she came to tell me to knock off.

"I don't want you to overwork," she said. "If you want to read, Laura is the highbrow of the family. She'll lend you books. Lotta is musical, and Rose paints in water-colours. They're all kind of artistic, you see. . . . My! it's fantastic how you seem the dead spit of that boy of mine. David was his name. Would you mind if I called you David?"

"If you like, ma'am," I said politely.

"My poor boy! I told you he was drowned at sea?" I had imagined she had said something about a railway. Well, probably the train had been crossing an arm of the sea and the bridge broke. . . .

The old lady was definitely queer, but she was so sweet and gentle I felt I would not have minded being her son.

That night I was in a happy mood, as I lay in a comfortable bed and stared at the shingle roof. It was so quiet there. Up at the house they were making merry. There was a lot of light and the sound of a Viennese waltz. Oh, if only I could have played the piano like that! Thank heaven, these nice people had not seen my blatant advertisement. What a fourflusher they would have thought me. Now I was in my place, a casual labourer. And I must be careful to keep it. Very cultured folks, evidently a Southern family. . . . Must be superior, or I would eat with them instead of being relegated to the kitchen. For here it was the custom for the hired man to eat with the family. . . . Well, no doubt they were right. Anyway, it was all right with me, and I would show them I knew my place. . . . And so thinking I fell blissfully to sleep.

I was awakened by the cocker spaniel leaping on my bed. She greeted me with joyous abandon. So going out I went to the water tap and, fixing a length of hose to it, I sprayed myself all over. I had just finished when I saw Aunt Mirandy looking at me. Feeling ashamed, I grabbed my towel protectively; but she laughed with a dazzle of teeth.

"You is shu' handsome, white boy. I like you a lot better'n that no-good Pete. Ah wish you'd share ma baid till dat niggah come home. Well, breakfast am awaitin', honey boy."

I sat down to a feed of mush, ham and eggs, hot cakes and coffee. About the rest of the house there was no sign of life. I remarked on this, and Aunt Mirandy replied: "De fam'ly don't git up befo' noon. Dey was quite a party las' night. Guess they musta kept it up kinda late."

I saw some empty champagne bottles on the dresser. No doubt some kind of celebration had taken place. There would be singing and dancing, and wine and supper, and the girls would have their *fiancés*. . . . Well, that meant nothing to me, so I went contentedly back to my quarters and groomed the fat pony. I was spading the garden when Madame appeared. She looked tired, as if she had slept but little, and she carried a small dispatch case.

"Good morning, David. I just wanted to show you some pictures of my boy who was killed on the Mexican border, as I told you before." There was indeed a likeness between us, except that he was a hundred per cent. tougher than I could ever hope to be. From his costume he might have been anything from a cattle rustler to Billy the Kid. To his mother seemingly he was a hero and a model of all the virtues. Sighing, she put away the photo and went sadly back to the house.

My! how I liked that place. As I smoked my pipe on a tree trunk in the grove, it seemed so peaceful and screened from the outside world. For me it was like a dream come true. I was practically my own master, and my work was light. I was well fed, treated with kindly consideration. If only I had some books my happiness would be complete. As I was so thinking, Miss Laura came down the pathway. I stared, for she was wearing what looked to me like a circus costume—corduroy breeches and top-boots. Up to now I had always seen women dressed for riding in long skirts. How this costume would have scandalized the Canadian settlement!

"You look shocked," she said. "Is there anything wrong with me?"

Wrong! I thought she looked lovely, with her gardenia complexion, seal-black hair and sloe-dark eyes. I said: "No, miss, but where I come from women wear petticoats to ride horseback."

"How stupid of them! They must look sights. . . . But I imagine you're not much used to women."

"No, miss; the kind I like don't like me, and the other kind I don't like." She gave me a curious look. I was saddling up the pony, and her nearness embarrassed me. I thought: "I must seem a boor to her." She leapt on the pony, then turned and said: "How do you like Nietzsche?"

"I don't know. Is it a breakfast food?" She laughed and, with a flick of her switch, cantered away. But that evening Aunt Mirandy handed me a book. "With Miss Laura's compliments. Ah, she shu' is cultuhed, that gel." I read on the cover: *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

I found Lotta less aloof than Laura; in fact, we became quite friendly. She was talkative, and when she found I knew 'Frisco, we had a common cause for conversation. For she claimed to have been born there and had been called after the Lotta Fountain. Her father, she said, had driven the one-horse tramway that ran along Market Street to hold a charter. I wondered if he was Horace, the slow husband of Madame; for that car was surely the last word in leisurely locomotion. But there was nothing slow about Lotta. She was a lively girl, with light red hair, high cheek-bones, a wide smile, and fine teeth. Our common bond was a love of music. She played the piano quite badly, and told me a professor came every night to give her a lesson. He must have been the one I heard playing waltz music in the evening when the house was alight. I saw him only once, a short pousy man, with a red nose, and I marvelled that so ugly a person could be a fine musician.

Lotta was the chummy sort, and one day she allowed me to see her room. Each of the girls had her own apartment, consisting of

a lounge, and back of it a bedroom and bathroom. On her wall hung a guitar. It was a Spanish guitar of a small size suitable for a lady. At once it attracted my attention, and I felt my fingers itching to caress its strings. "May I tune it?" I said.

"Go ahead. I wish I could play. I love it, but somehow my fingers are all thumbs when it comes to string instruments."

"Maybe I can show you how to strum. That's about all I can do myself." So I tuned the guitar, which was not so easy, as it had ebony pegs and gut strings. It was old-fashioned, but the tone was mellow and sweet. I caressed it lovingly, then played some arpeggios and chords. After which I strummed softly while I crooned *Juanita* and *Santa Lucia*. Lotta liked it, but when I tried to show her how to chord in the tone of D, which is the easiest, I had no success. Both in the stroke and the fingering she was so awkward that I gave up in despair.

"There must be a knack in it," I said. "To me playing a musical instrument is a simple thing, once you know the scale. You simply hit the right notes and ignore the wrong ones."

"I always hit the wrong ones and avoid the right," she said. "No, I'll be glad if you accompany me when I sing, but I know I can never get the hang of it. You have to have the gift. But you take the guitar to your cabin and enjoy it." I was so happy I handled it as if it were a treasure. My progress was experimental and full of wishful seeking. As I played I listened intently to the sounds I made and tried to improve on them. Sitting on my bed, I fingered the strings tenderly, trying different ways of accompanying. I did not bother much with melody, but I practised harmonic rhythm and scales till I became reasonably expert. I kept to the C, D and G chords and their relative minors. Late into the night I played them over till my fingers ached.

The next night I began to sing all the old songs I could remember, blending my voice to the tone of the guitar. I strummed softly and crooned my melodies, so that I got a soothing effect. All of which intrigued me so much I forgot all else. There, in the loneliness of my shack, I strummed and sang, while up at the big house I could hear music and laughter. Southern hospitality at its heartiest. High jinks, but they meant nothing to me. All I asked was that sweet little guitar and the music in my heart.

Only once did I venture out of the grounds, and strolled down the road a way. From the Villa I could hear dance music on the piano, and there were half a dozen horses and buggies tied up to the front fence. Lights gleamed brilliantly through the leafage, while the red lantern above the gateway made a note of colour like the glow of a ruby. The family were making merry, and who was I to blame them? When one is young it is natural to have a gay time.

Yet ever so gladly I returned to the quiet of my cabin, and fondled my guitar. . . .

I was particularly happy because I discovered in the course of my strumming that I could *compose*. As I improvised I would sometimes strike a theme that did not seem too familiar to me. Convinced of its comparative originality, I would develop it till I had rounded off a melody. Then I would put my own words to it. These words seemed to come naturally as I hummed the melody. Pretty soon a ditty was evolved. This was my beginning as a song writer. From then on I composed song after song. It became my hobby. In after years I published about thirty of these efforts, all of which were highly unsuccessful. But that I do not mind. No poetic triumph ever gave me so much joy as the making of songs. They were my own and I could sing them if no one else would, which generally they wouldn't. I have no regret for so much time wasted, for the happiness they gave me made them a success. Effort, I think, matters more than achievement.

So as I sat on my bed and muddled out melodies, I was quite unreasonably content. Romantically I conceived myself as a troubadour, roaming from place to place, playing to entertain the throng. It seemed to me I would not care if I were in rags, so long as I could sing and saunter on life's pathway. A strolling minstrel—yes, I saw myself in that part, and it pleased me mightily.

Every day Madame paid me a visit. No one of the family seemed to get up before noon, so that it was around three when she would appear, clad in a bright silk kimono. She dug up other photos of her dead son, and some of them emphasized the likeness between us; but her statements as to his fate were vague and varied. Sometimes I wondered if she were not a little crazy on the subject. In any case she was mighty nice to me. Indeed there were moments when I thought I might have been her own son, so maternal was she. She persisted in calling me David, and cautioned me against wine, women and cards. I enjoyed her visits, for they took me off my work of spading the garden.

However, I was getting on well with this job, doing it deliberately because I did not see what was coming after. I planted peas and French beans, radishes and carrots, parsley and lettuce. As I longed to see the seed come up, I thought I would have been very happy as a gardener. But there was not enough work to keep me steadily employed, and I foresaw an early dismissal. The thought made me sad.

On Sundays I spent much of my time sitting in the sunny quietness of the eucalyptus trees. I inhaled their perfume and admired the soft mauves and russets of their scaling trunks. They were my



friends. Also my friends were the piebald pony, the golden cocker, and the silver-grey cat. I taught the dog to sit up and beg, and she became so affectionate I think she liked me better than her mistress. The only one I could not make friends with was the turtle. He baffled and discouraged me, but his very passivity was soothing to the spirit. So there in the quiet sunniness I was serenely glad.

Every night I used to read *Zarathustra*. It proved the finest of soporifics. After a dozen pages I dozed off. Yet I can honestly say I read every word of that book. Why, I don't know, unless it was to please Laura; though how such a book could interest her I never could guess. Yet many marked passages proved that she had studied it. To me it seemed full of windy phrases, empty of real meaning. As for its philosophy, I frankly confess it was beyond me. Of course I have a concrete mind and a love of common sense; so, though I was prepared to admit the beauty of the book, I failed to appreciate its greatness. Incidentally, I wonder how many have read it through as I did.

So far I have not spoken of Rose, the youngest of the sisters, because my feelings for her were delicate and personal. She was so small, quiet and timid in her manner, she aroused my protective sense. She liked me because I liked her dog, and would sometimes come to the grove to visit me. She was very pretty, but wan and tired-looking. She had violet shadows under her eyes and a figure like a boy. Once she told me she had trouble with her lungs. "When the time comes," she said, "I'll go into a sanatorium. Meanwhile, on with the dance."

I felt sorry for her. I do not know whether these girls thought me a boor or a bore, but they were kind to me, and I was grateful. I saw little of them and knew less, yet I showed them respect and a humble desire to please. For a long time I had not spoken to a woman. I was shy and diffident, and maybe they looked on me as a harmless dreamer.

Still, there was a strange atmosphere about the place. Once as I stood by the back gate the postman passed. I hailed him: "If you have any letters for the family I'll take them to the house."

He was an elderly man, and looking at me curiously over his spectacles, he grunted: "And who might you be?"

Pointing to the garden, I said: "I work here." After hesitating, he gave me several letters which I took to Aunt Mirandy. They were mostly advertisements addressed to the three girls, but I was surprised to see that their surnames were different. Then I remembered that Madame had had several husbands, and of course her changes of name must have been frequent. One thing I noticed was that Madame did not like me talking to her daughters. Perhaps she

was afraid I might want to marry one of them. And, except for the kitchen, she never took me into the house. Well, some people are like that. They may have a cordial affection for you, but they will not ask you into their homes. The hearth is sacred. She did not want complications, especially with Rose, who was so childlike in her innocence. Several times she found us together, and on the last occasion she was quite upset. Next day she came to me. "David, when will you finish your work in the garden?"

I had feared this. I stretched the time as far as possible. "Oh, about the end of the week."

"Well, after that I'm afraid I'll have to let you go. There won't be enough work to keep you busy, and there's no use you wasting your time."

"I'll be very sorry to go," I said. "I've been mighty happy here. It's been like a home to me. I'd work for my board if you'd let me."

"Never do that, David. You're a nice young man, and I like you a lot, but you don't think enough of yourself. With your manners you should be doing something better than this."

"When a fellow gets down, ma'am," I told her, "it's mighty hard to get up again."

"Oh, you'll get up again all right. Only you gotta rustle, not rust. Really, it will be for the best if you get away. Besides, Big Pete will be out next week. He's a razor totin' coon, and he's liable to raise Cain if he finds you asleepin' in his cabin. . . . No, David, I hate to be sayin' this, but you'd better git agoin'. Sunday I'll pay you for the full month. It's because I like you so much I'm asendin' you away." Then, to my amazement, she began to cry, dabbing her eyes with a little lace handkerchief.

I did not see any more of the girls. They seemed to be keeping out of my way, but on Sunday morning they all turned out to bid me good-bye. They seemed to be truly sorry and my heart was sad. Madame kissed me on both cheeks; then, to my embarrassment the girls did the same. But the greatest surprise was to come. Lotta came forward with a brown leather case and put it into my hands.

"The guitar," she said. "You keep it as a souvenir of us all." I protested a little, but they made me accept it. Then, as I walked down the road, they waved to me from the porch. In that Mission setting, they might have been a Mother Superior and three Sisters. God bless them. . . .

## Chapter Eight

### WANDERING MINSTREL

HAVING now thirty dollars between myself and the need to sell myself, I decided to keep that barrier standing as long as possible. Be my days full of penury, never would I be broken on the wheel of toil. Better than bondage was vagabondage. Thus resolving I swung once more on to the open road. But I had not bargained for the extra weight of the guitar; so, going to the station I expressed one of my blankets to the left luggage office in Los Angeles. Incidentally, I never had the price to retrieve it. I often regretted that blanket, but it was worth while shivering of a night to be able to play an hour or so before going to sleep.

I was now able to arrange my pack and guitar, so that both were slung behind me, and the weight was only thirty pounds. So I added to it by purchasing a tin billy, a tin cup, a quarter-pound of tea, half a pound of sugar, and two pounds of ship's biscuit. With this I felt independent. For a few days at least I would not starve. My last act was to sew in the pocket of my black shirt five of the five-dollar gold pieces the old lady had paid me. This gave me a feeling of security, and it was with cheerful confidence I started out.

As I was no near to Mexico I decided it would be a pity not to visit that romantic land. A jaunt in the desert would enrich my experience. Besides, I had a longing to stretch my legs again. So I trudged south till I arrived at a collection of hovels called Tia Juana. I thought it would be a bright idea to send home a postcard with the Mexican postmark. It would be so nice if Papa, in answer to inquiries, would be able to reply: "Oh, he's travelling in Mexico. Taking a little holiday from his arduous duties as a horticulturist."

So I bought a very gaudy postcard and looked around for a stamp. The only building of any importance seemed to be the Custom House. Accordingly I entered one of the offices and presenting a nickel asked for its equivalent in Mexican postage. The official looked indignantly at this brash American and ordered me out. Not to be discouraged, I entered a second door and again presented my nickel to a fat man at a desk. To my dismay it was the same. This time he was angry and stormed at me with all the fury of a Spanish nature. I beat a hasty retreat. Then I waited a little and

prospected around. At last I came to another door which I thought I might try. A portly individual was sitting before a roll-top desk. He looked important and seemed very busy. Nevertheless I thought he might be kind-hearted, so approaching I thrust my nickel gently under his nose. When he swung around I saw to my horror that it was the same man. This time I did not wait. Followed by a shout of wrath I made the street in one bound, and, as I fled, a volley of imprecations followed me.

In a tavern of the town I had *chili con carne* and *frijoles*, and, after I had eaten copiously, I went out on the mesa. Behind some mesquite bushes I camped for the night. I drew a ring in the ground, which I fondly hoped would discourage rattlesnakes, then squatting in my blanket, I tinkled on my guitar a song to the stars. After which I lay down on the stony soil and sought to sleep. But the strangeness of the situation made it difficult. Wrapped in my blanket with the guitar for a pillow, I stared at the stars and pondered my position. Something about it tickled me, so that I laughed at the spangled heavens, and the friendly little stars laughed back at me. Then I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the chattering of my teeth. The night had grown bitterly cold, and I shuddered violently. So I donned every scrap of clothing I possessed, tied a handkerchief around my jaws to check the rattling of my molars, and was able to sleep again. When the stars paled in the sky I roused, and stretched my stiffened limbs. As the day dawned I made a small fire and had breakfast. The boiling tea bucked me up wonderfully, while, though tough to the teeth, my hardtack was sweet to the tongue.

So all day I tramped through that arid and inhospitable land. But its very strangeness kept me interested. There were lots of cactus and yucca trees, and snakes and jack-rabbits. At noon I stopped at a low adobe farmhouse that looked less wretched than its neighbours, and inquired of the frousy dame at the door if I might have a feed. That is, I pointed to my tongue and my tummy and tendered a dime. She made me enter the earth-floored hovel and gave me beans, cornbread and coffee, a feast for a famished man.

The days that followed were monotonous, but I enjoyed them. Perhaps their very sameness gave them a certain vagueness, for I find it difficult to recall what I thought and felt in my wandering. Probably I hardly thought at all, because by now the novelty of my position was wearing off. No longer did I romanticize myself. I took my setting for granted and accepted it as if I belonged there.

My supreme fitness gave me a sense of exaltation. To my fingertips I radiated health, and my energy seemed inexhaustible. This surprised me, as I was sleeping on the bare ground with very little

sustaining food. Yet I never caught cold, and after a meal of three biscuits, hard as rocks and chewed deliberately, I could do a dozen miles with spirit. Yet sometimes I was light-headed, so I may have been drawing on reserves of energy.

As my chief difficulty was getting water, I generally camped near a farm. People were friendly. They offered me eggs and tomatoes, and often invited me to partake of a regular meal. This embarrassed me, as I hate to accept hospitality I cannot return. But I could see these kind folks would be hurt if I suggested payment. Indeed, they seemed to be apologizing for the poorness of their fare. All I could do in gratitude was to play my guitar and sing for them. I gave them a Spanish fandango with variations, and accompanied them to their own songs, so that I actually sang for my supper. . . .

Thus rambling, gipsy fashion, I reached a small town called Encenado. I was so tanned by the glare of the mesa that when I glimpsed myself in a mirror, I stared as at a stranger. Could that bronzed, lean-jawed roughneck be I? Indeed, I felt fascinated by this new self. I had the arrogance of wide spaces and the disdain for folk who sleep in beds. For a day I remained in town, eating two square meals, drinking beer in taverns, and smoking my pipe. But I decided to go no further into Mexico. For the moment I had glutted my appetite for loneliness, and the monotony of the mesa was beginning to weary me. I was sick of cactus and yucca tree, of *frijoles* and *cassava*. Oh, for God's country once again!

When I reached it, I found I had spent only a dollar during my ten days of wandering. I was in rare walking fettle and could reel off my thirty miles between dawn and dark. But I was anxious about my shoes. I could not well afford a new pair, and when I gained a good highway I took them off. So, singing and strumming the guitar, I swung along barefoot till I arrived at the outskirts of San Diego.

I sadly wanted to visit the Villa Lilla, but shame kept me away. I had done no good since I had left there. I had been little better than a bum. When I thought of the advice the old lady had given me, and how little I had heeded it, I was afraid to face her again. Yet I longed to see how the garden truck was coming up. I wanted to greet my friends, even Horace the turtle; but I did not want the girls to think me a scallywag. I wished them to believe me worthy of their friendship.

I stopped long enough in the little town to buy more hardtack and tea. I also bought steel strings for the guitar. I found the gut ones were affected by the damp of the road and hard to keep in tune. From then on I played cowboy fashion with a pick.

Heading north again I started out with a light heart. There was

a full moon and, as the nights were so cold, I decided to rest during the day. The moon seemed to affect me strangely, giving me a crazy feeling, as if I were an unreal person walking in a world of dream. I have always been a minion of the moon. From the tropics to near the Pole I have worshipped it, deeming it the most beautiful sight in all creation. So in that tramp the white fire of fantasy glowed in me.

Yet though the moon did its best to light my way. I had to give up night walking. For I had now taken to the railway track, and I had not bargained for trestle bridges. These spanned ravine and river at frequent intervals, and even in daylight I dreaded them. As I stepped from tie to tie, I dared not look down at the abyss below. But in the moonlight, when each sleeper was a silver bar, and the moon-mist swooned around me, even a minor trestle was more than I could face. So I had to travel by day again; but, as the railway kept skirting the sea, I enjoyed myself immensely; and one evening, coming on a lonely beach, I decided to have a dip. There had been a sudden change in the weather. The sky was cowed with cloud, all except a narrow chink where it met the horizon. The effect of gunpowder sky and shark-grey sea was strangely sinister.

As I stripped I saw a black hump rising and falling quite near to the shore. I wondered what manner of monster it might be, and how it could come so close to the beach. But no doubt the depth was sudden and profound. The stamp of the waves on the shingle was short and angry. Somehow I did not like it, but I said: "I'll go anyhow." However, I hadn't taken three paces when I was up to my knees in a quicksand. Another step, I was engulfed to the waist. With a quick twist I threw myself forward and desperately tried to disengage myself. A moment of panic and struggle, then, by a great effort, I wrenched my legs free from the grip of the sand. So, half floating, half drifting, I regained the beach.

And as I lay there, panting but full of gratitude for my escape, the sun peered though that gap of cloud and sea. At first it was like molten gold on the waves, then it kindled to a fierce ruby. As the sun centre passed the gap, the effect was terrific. Furious blades of light smote sea and cloud, transforming them into a raging furnace. The intensity of the conflagration was almost unbearable. Half blinded by that garnet glare, I danced naked on the beach and yelled with joy. Then the barbaric splendour passed, and the glow that followed was baleful. And I thought that *only I* had seen that pyrotechnic splendour; that last frenzy of the dying sun was for me alone.

I slept that night on the lonely beach, making a fire of drift wood and boiling water from a brook. As I drank the sweet scalding tea and munched the hard biscuit, I had that queer feeling of un-

reality that often came to me in those days. I was going forward in a dream in which I seemed to have lost all contact with the past. I was an automatic being, impelled by a destiny beyond my control. For a long time I smoked my pipe and brooded by the light of the camp-fire. I mused: "If you try to play with Life, Life will end by playing with you. You waste your youth in foolish adventure, and soon you will have nothing to show for your youth. You turn your back on society, and society refuses to take you back." That was what I was doing, and sitting there I had a hopeless moment before I lay down. The sand was soft but cold, the salt air raw and damp. I slept little, and in the morning I found my blanket soggy and chill.

Soon, however, the sun warmed me, and I went on my way cheerfully, though there was little to be cheerful about. As I trudged the ties I took some comfort from the scenery, with the ocean on one hand, and on the other green cattle country. There were forests of live oaks and park-like lands; then rugged draws and ranges of sage brush. Once I passed a gang of section men who looked at me contemptuously, sizing me up as a hobo. This was not true. I might be a tramp, but I had money in my pocket. And in all my wanderings I must confess that I have never begged a meal nor stolen a ride. I admit frankly that I never achieved my ambition to be a *pukka* hobo.

That night I slept by the side of the track, though I should have moved further back; for three times I was shaken out of my sleep by the roar of the train. The sensation was as if the monster was on top of me. So the following night I camped by a water tank. I could have made more mileage, but was afraid I could not get water further on. Much as I liked my tea, I did not relish the idea of packing water for it. And as I sat by the tank, three hobos came along—at least I judged them that because they carried no packs. In this, however, I was mistaken. The genuine hobo despises work. These three were willing to labour, though not over-enthusiastic about it. As I walked many miles with them, let me briefly describe them:

Cap was a tall rangy man of fine physique, with a florid face and rusty hair. He was of the soldier type, having served as a trooper in the Mexican army. With reminiscent eyes, he would tell strange stories of his life odyssey. He was not averse to work, but strong liquor was his stumbling-block. As soon as he got a sizable stake he would throw up the best job and go off on a prolonged drinking bout. He lived between job and jag. His chief peculiarity was that he shaved scrupulously.

Shorty was a chunky fellow with a stubbly face. Like myself he

would only work long enough to get money for a spell of idleness. To him, work meant leisure and laziness, while to me it meant time to read and dream. He was not vicious, but he had a perfectly reasonable objection to animal toil.

Slim was well dressed, compared to the others. He had a town-made suit, which he conserved anxiously, and fine boots, which were not suited to stepping the ties. He was willing to work too, but it had to be a white-collar job. He called himself a feed store clerk, although anything in the light labour line was his meat. When we drew near to town he put on a white collar and spruced himself up. Thus arrayed, he vowed he could talk any housewife into handing him out a square meal.

I offered these three musketeers of the road a cup of tea, which only Cap accepted. He had been in Australia and learned to like it. The others would have preferred coffee, but all would have preferred beer. Then we got to talking. Although they looked wonderingly at the guitar, they assumed I was a sailor who had jumped his ship, and at once called me Jack. But presently Slim took out of his pocket a recent newspaper.

"There's a killer on the road," he said, looking at me. "A guy's got to be careful these days." He then read a paragraph to the effect that near to Santa Anna an unknown man had been found with his head bashed in. Though evidently a tramp, an empty wallet had been found near him. Robbery was suspected as the motive of the crime.

"Well, we've come from the South, so that lets us out," said Cap. "But if a man's travelling alone he ought to be mighty leary of the company he meets up with. Especially if he's got a bit of dough."

"Who would be hitting the ties if he had dough?" said Shorty. "Anyway, if the cops are after a man, the jungle's the safest place I know."

"I dunno," said Slim. "If a guy's hot, the wilds of the city seem to me the best hideaway." Then followed a conversation on crime and its evasion, to which Cap listened contemptuously. With his blond moustache and regular features, he made the others look like rats. I wondered if either of them would rob or kill. I was sure Shorty would not, for the eyes that gleamed from under his shaggy eyebrows had the brown honesty of a terrier's. But Slim was of the vulpine type, sneaking and furtive. Still, I did not think that, even at his worst, he would go so far as to bash in a man's head.

And as they talked I said to myself: "Ah! If they knew of the twenty-five dollars wrapped in wool in the breast pocket of my old sateen shirt." It made a bulge against which I could feel the tapping of my heart. Formerly it had been a comforting feeling, but now



it gave me a vague sense of fear. Evidently my safety on the road depended on my poverty. Not only must I be broke, I must be flat broke. I must not be seen spending a dime. These five gold pieces would make me seem a bloated capitalist and give them, as members of the proletariat, the right to despoil me. Well, I would try to forget them myself until the day they were needed.

I was relieved, however, when the three rose and went their way. They aimed to be reaching the next village by nightfall. "It's a good burg to batter," said Slim. "I smell ham and eggs and a nice kip in the straw of a barn. Well, so long, Jack. Mind the Killer."

So with the plea of sore feet I watched my musketeers depart, and remained a dejected D'Artagnan under the water tank. I, too, would have enjoyed a square meal and a warm place to sleep. The fact that the section bunkhouse was near the tank was my reason for camping there. If I were attacked during the night, I hoped my yells for help would bring the hands to my rescue; though I doubt if they would have broken their sleep to go to the aid of a lousy hobo.

After my usual breakfast of tea and hardtack, the genial sun tried to cheer my drooping spirits, and the lovely scenery conspired to raise my heavy heart. The railway often skirted the fringe of ocean, while on the land side valleys mantled with purple sage rose to grey-green ranges. Although without adventure, the day was memorable for a feed that set me back a quarter. For I bought a can of corned beef at a village store, and oh, how I did enjoy it! Vegetarianism may be beautiful for the soul, but a good chunk of meat rejoices the belly. As I ate with gusto, I wished my can had been twice as big.

That evening I was attracted by a pile of old railway ties alongside the track, and the idea came to me to make a hut. It took about a dozen for each side. I left the front open, and over my framework I laid ties to form a roof. The erection looked so shaky I viewed it with concern. If it collapsed on me I would be somewhat crushed. As I crawled in gingerly I felt like a big dog in a giant dog-house.

I had not been long resting when I roused with a jerk. A man was stooped in the doorway of my kennel. At first I thought it was the section boss, and he would be giving me hell for using his ties; then I saw it was a thin man of the hobo fraternity.

"Hullo, mate," I said, but he made no reply. As further amiabilities seemed misplaced, I crawled cautiously out, lit my pipe and watched him. First he made a big fire of brushwood, then piled railway ties on it. They were dry and primed with tar, so that they burned fiercely. Soon he had a roaring blaze. Then he fetched a single tie and laid it alongside the fire. His next action was to carry

a big round stone from the beach. This he placed on one end of the tie. Then he stretched himself full length on the wood, and laid his head on the stone. Folding his arms he seemed to fall asleep instantly.

Puffing my pipe I watched him, a long, lank figure, with his hat drawn over his eyes. He had not spoken a word, nor even answered my greeting. He had not given a look in my direction. I felt uneasy. Rigid and stark, he seemed to be a part of the log on which he lay. His head and the stone seemed one. The huge bonfire lit him luridly. After a little I crawled into my hut again, but I could not sleep. That gold in my pocket seemed a heavy weight on my chest. I got to thinking all kinds of horrors, and finally fear came to me. It may have been foolish, but silently I packed my stuff in my blankets, and stealthily sneaked out of my shelter. On rising ground just beyond was a little grove of chestnut trees. There, in a hollow full of dried leaves, I dozed till dawn.

When I peered down on my recent camp, the fire was still smouldering. Like a grey wraith, I saw the man rise, and with his feet he pushed over my unstable hut. Only a heap of jumbled ties was left to mark my labour of the night before. Did he know I had gone? Would he have done that if I had been inside? Would he have crushed me in that trap? I will never know. From the comfort and security of my leafy hollow I watched him vanish in the morning mist.

Next morning I caught up with my musketeers. I felt relieved to meet them, and we walked on together. I told them of my experience of the night, and again all three warned me: "Don't sleep near the track." So in future I determined I would select a camp that was not in the pathway of crazy hobos or potential killers.

Then that afternoon something happened that gave me a great deal of pleasure. We were passing a gang of construction labourers who were mending a culvert. These are superior to section hands, even ranking as carpenters. Cap was looking at them with a wistful light in his blue eyes. Suddenly he said: "I think I'll brace the boss for a job." We watched him go forward and speak to the foreman. Presently he came back, his eyes shining with delight.

"I'm taken on, boys. Well, good-bye and good luck." A few minutes later we saw him with his coat off, working with the gang as if he had been one of them all along.

"Cap's lucky," said Shorty sadly. "Wish they'd give me a job too." Slim did not share his wish. His virtuosity was not in that line. So we went on our way, happy that our big comrade was being given the chance to make a stake again.

## Chapter Nine

### DRIFTER

THAT evening we got to the village town of Santa Anna, and there by the flimsy frame station, we separated. They went on a begging foray, and I sneaked into a Jap restaurant and ordered a breaded cutlet. It cost me ten cents, but I enjoyed it hugely. As I ate, I saw Slim and Shorty pass the door. I wanted to ask them to join me, but a sense of delicacy prevented me. I did not like them to know I had money when they had none. So they passed out of my life.

That night I camped in a dry ditch on the outskirts of the town. I was glad my tramp was coming to an end, for I felt the need of a loafing spell. I would be very happy to see Los Angeles again. That day I left the railway and took to the highway. It ran through a rich land of fruit groves, lemon and orange, walnut and fig. Regardless of appearance I took off my shoes and walked barefoot. I must have looked a sight. I had not shaved since leaving San Diego. My overalls and denim jumper were stained and torn. I tried to cheer me by playing the guitar as I walked, but it did not work very well. When one is gloomy one does not make gay music. I must have seemed a strange figure. No wonder people stared at me as they would at a half-crazy man.

And as I trudged along I felt suddenly forlorn. This land was opulent, but in it was no place for me. Where was I driving to? There was no work for me but the lowest form of physical toil. I was down indeed, and the world seemed determined to keep me down. That was the social system, here as elsewhere. Keep the lowly low. They are needed for the brutish forms of labour. Pin them in their place—which is underfoot. So with thoughts of revolution, I marched through miles of glowing fruit and green vineyards. Once I halted to tackle a boss for a job, but I fancied he looked at me with distaste as he turned me down. After that I had not the heart to risk another rebuff. One refusal always flattened me out for the rest of the day.

I was drawing near to Los Angeles when I overtook a boy trudging home from school. He had a friendly manner, and he fell into step beside me. "You have a funny way of speaking," he said.

"Maybe. You see, I'm Scotch."

"My father's Scotch, but my mother's Irish. I'm American."

"And what part of Scotland did your father come from?"

"Ayrshire. Where Burns lived. He's always reading Burns."

"That's interesting, and what's your name?"

"Jimmy Service."

I was rather amazed. I knew there were a number of people of my name in that part of the world, and some might have hailed from my home town. I said: "That's funny. My name's Service too."

"Maybe you're a relation. Say, why don't you come and see Pop? He's so glad to meet anybody from the old country. If you're looking for work, he could give you a job. It's nice at our house. I have two grown-up sisters. We have lots of fun."

I was rather thrilled at his suggestion. Then I looked myself over and I thought: I'm only a misfit, a drifter. What if this man should know any of my family back home? What shame for me if these people prove to be distant relatives! There were girls, too, maybe pretty and attractive. No, I could not face them. . . .

Yet I had a moment of hesitation. I felt it was one of the cross-roads of destiny, in which my choice would make the greatest difference to my future. Here might be a chance to make good; for I had an instinctive feeling that these people would be kindly and sympathetic. They might give me the helping hand I sorely needed. So as my young friend turned off the road to a big house that twinkled in the trees, I had a moment's pause. Then something seemed to twist me right around, and, bidding him good-bye, I went off in the opposite direction. Once more I mused: What is directing my steps? This road might have been one of comfort, leading to security. I might have become something better than a casual labourer. I might even have risen to be a self-respecting member of society. . . . Well, a force stronger than myself seemed to be drawing me on to another destiny, and, even though it looked a gloomy one, I must fulfil it.

I camped for the last time on the outskirts of Los Angeles. In the early morning I entered the city like a whipped dog. As I slunk along the beloved streets, I had not the heart to return to my old lodging. I had left there with the brave boast that I was going to a swell job, and I did not want to face the gang with failure written on my face. For suddenly I felt very tired and infinitely discouraged. I wanted to sleep in a bed again, and rest . . . rest. Slim had told me that the Salvation Army quarters were cheap, so there I betook myself. During my tramp from San Diego I had spent only a dollar, and now I felt I was justified in blowing a couple more in riotous living. I would stay a week here while I meditated my next move.

For ten cents a night I had a small cubicle. It was clean, though it had no window. A skylight over the door provided a perpetual twilight. In the eating room I could get a dish of beans, with bread and coffee, for five cents. In the evening I could get a meal with hash instead of beans, for the same price. I was too hungry to be fastidious about its cleanliness. These two meals, with bread and oranges, made up my daily ration, and I felt fine on it. For bed and board it cost me only twenty-five cents a day.

As the place was the headquarters of the hobo fraternity, I was able to study them. Every morning they went out to "batter the burg." Some begged for food; others bummed in the streets for a dime. Those who went after grub returned with newspaper packages. Fastidiously they would turn over the mixed victuals, cursing the givers if the food was not to their fancy. What they liked was meat, pie and cake. They would eat the ham in a sandwich, throwing the bread away. They were dainty in their hunger, demanding eggs, sausage and cheese. A buttered roll or biscuit they would scorn, deeming it a dirty trick played on them. Those who begged for money were drinking men. They patronized the free lunch counters, and for a nickel would often contrive to have a fair meal with their beer. If they were lucky they would return more or less lit up, and boast of the way they had trimmed the suckers.

The older hobos were, as a rule, morose and taciturn. They were the grizzled weather-beaten tramps one met on the track with gunny-sacks on back. They were the Great Unwanted, incapable of hard work, and unable to get soft jobs. Outcasts, accepting their fate, they awaited their time to die like dogs in ditches. They seldom stole a ride on a train. It was the young ones who specialized in that, and who bragged of their expertness. I have heard one boast: "I can beat my way to any State in the Union. There's no brakeman can stop me. Box car, flat car, riding the buffers or the rods, it's all the same to me." One would hear a young fellow say: "Well, I'm pulling out to-night on the sleeper for 'Frisco. So long, fellows. See you on the Barbary Coast." Then someone would blow in from Chicago, to be greeted with howls of recognition: "Why, here's old Rusty. Say, how's everything on the Pike?"

There was great fraternity among these hobos, and they gave each other tips as to the chances of successful pan-handling. Some of them had young boys whom they trained to beg and steal, and who were said to serve as male sweethearts for their protectors. In a raffish way many of them were good-looking, and all reeked of the road.

Such was the society in which I now found myself. I talked to none of them, but I studied them with interest. When I tired of that, I would retreat to my room and play ever so softly on my

guitar. On the track of new melodies I would forget my troubles to glean a momentary happiness.

Seated in the sunshine of the public square I tried to figure out my future. I was caught in the proletarian trap. I felt as futile as a beetle impaled on a pin. By my own willing I had plunged myself to the bottom of the social abyss, and now, having found the foulness of it, I wanted to climb out. But it was going to be "one hell of a job."

Of course I could write home for funds. No, I was too proud for that. Better to perish than admit defeat. Around me on the park benches were the dregs of the city. Well, I, too, was down at heel, but I was not down and out. "After all," I said, "why should I despair? I am in the pink and I have twenty-five plunks in my pocket. Ah! if I could only get a white-collar job again." And I looked at my hands. They were never meant to be deformed by toil. My frame was tough, but I only weighed ten stone—not enough for a pick-and-shovel man.

Nevertheless I had a try at it. They were burrowing into the hill above the town to make a tunnel for the tramway. I was taken on one morning, and put to shovelling in the face of clay and rock. It was gruelling work. The air was bad, the light evil. During the time I worked there was a cave-in, and two men were carried out on stretchers. When I came at noon to the blessed sunshine I did not return to the gloom. I made the city a present of my labour. Yes, as a sand-hog, I decided that I might be a fair poet; and returning to my derelicts in the Park I wrote some verses called *The Wage Slave*. I sent them nowhere, but years after I saw them included by Upton Sinclair in his anthology.

A few days later, having decided to try lighter work, I bought a job as a dish-washer in a big hotel. I thought my experience in the Pacific Gospel Saloon would fit me for that, but I soon realized the difference between an amateur and a professional. There were three of us, and I fell so far behind the others that I was ashamed. There is art even in washing dishes. Near to midnight I was fired, with a dollar for wages. It was the sum I had given to the employment bureau, so I was nothing out except my labour.

Once more the public square, and a dreary realization of failure. Even as a dish-washer I was no good. It seemed as if I belonged to the Great Unfit, and that in the fight for survival I must be trampled under. In my discouragement I fell back on philosophy. I thought: *What will be must be. The future as well as the past is a fixation. To-day was conditioned by yesterday, and to-morrow will be conditioned by to-day. Life is a pattern, woven to the last thread. What I do is the only thing I can do.*

A dangerous doctrine, no doubt. The Law of Cause and Effect supreme in the Universe. Determinism to the last degree. Free will a mockery. . . . Yes, I was a fatalist in my youth—and in my age I have found no reason to change my opinions.

Well, my destiny was on the knees of the Gods, and there was nothing I could do about it. Kind of comforting to think like that. With resignation I looked around me. Alongside me a man was reading a paper about a wonderful discovery of gold in a place called the Klondike. A TON OF GOLD COMES OUT OF THE FROZEN NORTH. Let it come. It did not interest me a bit. *The Klondike*. Bah! Let others seek their fortune in that icy land. Give me the sunshine and the South.

The man went away leaving the paper, and I read on: "Another gold rush like that of forty-nine. Maybe it will have its dramatic aspects. No doubt another Bret Harte will arise and sing of it in colourful verse." . . . Well, what concern was that of mine?—a hapless hobo on a park bench. "Arise and sing!" There now, these words meant something to me. I could do both. The troubadour spirit in me was not dead. With a thrill I thought of the Open Road.

Oh, how good it is to be  
Footloose and heartfree!

I would hit the trail again, the gipsy trail. Colorado, Nevada, Arizona. Magic names that appealed to the imagination. I would know them and win lustre with my intimacy. I would go there in many miles of wandering and many months of wayfaring. With my guitar I would be a modern minstrel singing for my supper.

So, on a brave bright morn of early spring, I again took up the trail of chance and change. I would make rhymes, strum, and croon my own songs. Yet, at the last moment, I almost left the guitar behind. Often I fancied it made me look grotesque. Perhaps folks thought me a little daft. Sometimes I wondered if they were not right. I still wonder. . . . No, I couldn't go without my guitar. It was my friend and comforter, and I loved it as a gipsy loves his violin.

And very soon I was glad I had taken it; for while walking through a land of lemon groves I felt athirst and asked an old man for a drink. From his adobe cottage he brought me a glass of water, into which he squeezed a lemon. As I drank, he eyed the guitar wistfully; then going into the cottage he returned with a mandolin.

"Maybe we maka de music?"

We tried. He played the usual Italian melodies and, listening intently, I supplied the chords. After several attempts we succeeded very nicely. He seemed to enjoy it even more than I. He asked me

to share his dinner, and when I rose to go he appeared to have something on his mind.

"I lika you stop. We maka de music. Mucha beautiful music." Then he offered me a job for five days. He wanted the land between his rows of lemon trees ploughed up to destroy the weeds. He had an old mule and a weeder, so for the rest of the week I went up and down his lemon grove and cleaned it. I loved the work. I could dream and make verse in the quietness all about me. I thought: How happy could I be in a lemon grove with books and music.

But the best of times comes to an end. He gave me five dollars and said good-bye. "No mora de music," he said mournfully. He was a lonely old man, grieving for the death of an only daughter. He hinted that soon he, too, was to die, and that if I would stay and work the place, he would leave it to me. But I felt I could not profit by his weakness, so I went on my way. A dark, sallow old Italian, with such sad eyes in a grooved face—I will always think of him with gentleness and regret. . . .

Among my cherished souvenirs is a worn dime. I think I must have tendered it a hundred times with a hollow smile, saying: "Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm so hungry I'm willing to give my last ten cents for a bit of dry bread and a glass of water. I'm not a bum, ma'am. Please let me pay."

They never did, and in most cases I had more than dry bread. In fact I often had a real feed. But whether or no, I always offered to do some chores to express my gratitude. This, too, would usually be refused. Then, if they felt like it, I would give them some music. Best-liked were cowboy songs, such as *Home on the Range*, *The Red River Valley* and the *Yellow Rose of Texas*; but Stephen Foster was a sure hit, and they often joined in the choruses. I loved to get them singing. After half a dozen numbers I felt I had earned my grub. In this way, without begging, I was able to provide myself with nourishment at little expense. Of course, I always had my tea and biscuits, which I eked out with fruit, cheese, or a tin of salmon. I put my expenses at five dollars a month, and I seldom exceeded this. In any case food played a big part in my vagabond days.

So I wandered many months, happily, on the whole. My zigzag progress took me over much of the West. Finally I got that I was sated with scenery, and it took something really magnificent to give me a thrill. Much of my wayfaring was monotonous and is now vague in my memory. I enjoyed my freedom, but sometimes I wondered if it was not leading me to the enslavement I was trying to evade. I had moments, too, when, wet and weary, I would feel very wretched. Then I would say: "If only my mother could look on me now, it's sorry she'd feel for her boy." Or there were hot, dry



days of torment and exhaustion when I would tell myself: "Well, at least you're *alive*. That ought to hold you for a bit." What finally took the heart out of me was the loss of my guitar. It happened this way.

I was crossing the Tehachapi Mountains, and for once I deserted the road and took to the track. On a long trestle I was overtaken by a train. I tried to make the end of the bridge, but was afraid the engine would catch me in a standing position. Every twenty ties or so there was a beam that jutted over the abyss. I was going to crawl out and wrap myself around one of these when I remembered the burden on my back. In a panicky way I detached myself from it and let it drop. I dared not look, but I knew my pack and guitar were at the bottom of the ravine. I had just time to crawl out and cling to the projecting timber. On the underside was a crevice into which I dug my fingers. Then, with head down and eyes closed, I waited. I wished I could have closed my ears too. A thunder deafened me, and a vibration almost made me lose my grip. That must have been the longest train in the world. For what seemed an eternity it went on. Then, suddenly, all was strangely still. Not daring to look down I crawled back to the rails.

I regained firm ground and descended into the ravine. A sluggish stream ran through it, and a little way down I found my pack, wet, but none the worse. Further on was the guitar. It had been smashed to matchwood and was immersed in water. I almost cried as I looked at the faithful old thing. Well, I left it there, and with something gone out of me I took up the trail. But I was about through. After that I had no more zest for wandering, so by devious ways I returned to Los Angeles. There in the square were the same old crocks and misfits. Would I become like them? As I surveyed myself, I thought bitterly: Heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time.

The man next me on the bench arose and left his paper. The first thing I read was: "Join the U.S. Marines and see the world." That might not be a bad idea. It might help me to rehabilitate myself, and there was a recruiting station a few blocks away. But something seemed to restrain me. I turned to the paper again and my eyes fell on a bit of news about British Columbia. Suddenly I decided I would return there, and that very night I took the boat for the North.

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BOOK SIX

*BRITISH COLUMBIA*



## Chapter One

### CALF BOY

THREE weeks later behold the Heir of All the Ages packing swill to swine. Not that I have anything against swine. Pigs are often preferable to some people. I can see poetry in a pigsty, and, in those days of inhibitions and complexes, a hog wallowing in the mire is a sight to restore sanity. I mention my occupation because it is another instance of my capacity for misdirected energy.

I have always felt that Nature intended me to be a dud. She gave me tiny talents which could only mean frustration. They diverted me from the true objective of my being. I could draw, play and act a little, but in each my achievement mocked my aspiration. On the other hand I have always had a love of literature and sense of words. This, combined with imagination, might have served me if I had ploughed a straight furrow. Unfortunately there were years and years when literature did not exist for me, and I gave myself up to vain pursuits.

Yes, I deserved to be a misfit, and I proved it in a sawmill in Oregon. For three whole days I held down a job of the back-breaking variety. My team-mate was a Swede, who had two hundred pounds of brawn and muscle against my hundred and forty. He had hair on his chest like a coconut, while mine was smooth as a melon. He was proud of the furze that came up to his Adam's apple and told me he combed it every night. I hope his comb was not of the small-tooth variety.

After three days of lumber lifting, I found myself stiff and sore and took my time cheque. As I had been living in a hotel I was not much ahead financially; so I pushed northward, my objective my old ranch. Back to the farm for little Willie. There, at least, was work I could handle, and I was duly appointed official cattleman. I cannot boast I have ever been the cowboy of my youthful dreams; but at least I have been a cowman; for I had fifty under my care, besides a score of their offspring.

I liked my job. I loved working with beasts, but not with men. I went my own way and even had time for a quiet pipe. But there was no shirking the work. It was insistent and inexorable. Morning and evening the cows had to be home at six, and the calves fed at

seven. I carried the skim milk to feed them from the cream separator in coal-oil cans with wire handles. It took ten trips across the barnyard to satisfy that bellowing band. And I had to teach the newest ones how to drink, putting my fingers soaked in milk into their mouths. Often I would plunge their noses into the fluid and they would snort it out on me. Silently beautiful and pathetic in their eagerness, it hurt me to think I was fattening them for the butcher.

I had also to act as midwife for the cows. Often I would pull on a protruding head to relieve a straining mother. I will always remember the first breath of the baby as it stumbled to its feet, and stared with surprise at a wicked world of veal. It seemed to me an ever-recurring miracle. The great drawback was that my sense of duty often kept me awake at nights. When a cow was about due I would worry so much that often I would descend to see how she was progressing. Sometimes a calf would be dropped in the gutter and would perish in the cold. This happened once, and I felt so miserable when I buried the poor little thing I resolved it would not occur again.

I spent two hours every day taking the cows to the pasture and bringing them back. In fine weather this was sheer pleasure. They were pastured in water meadows where the hayland was too cut up by sloughs to be cropped. There was a river running through it, and at high tide it would brim over its banks. I will always remember one evening when the cows had to swim. They plunged serenely in and made the crossing as if they were born amphibians. Driving them home they looked so sleek and clean. In the fields the men were getting in the hay, and its fragrance mingled with the milk-sweet scent of the cows. There, with the sun declining, it was one of those idyllic scenes of farm life that live in the memory.

No one can work with stock without losing temper. Sometimes my cows were so contrary as to force from me language that shocked myself. I would not have thought it possible that such lurid oaths and unspeakable blasphemies could have passed my lips. Most of this occurred when the cows took their places in the sheds. Then there would be goring and bellowing. The wise ones knew their own stalls, but they had a code of precedence that must not be ignored. Tail-twisting was forbidden, though one was sorely tempted to do them violence.

My calves took twenty cans of milk a day, and this had to be carried a distance of two hundred yards. The wires attached to the coal-oil cans cut into my palms, so with a piece of scantling and some gunnysacks I contrived a harness that I could place on my shoulders. It made me feel like a Chinese coolie, but saved my arm muscles. Every day, too, I had to take the dump-cart to the orchard, and cut a load of green grass, so that I came to enjoy the ideal

exercise of swinging a scythe. Indeed, there were many poetic sides to the job, given time to appreciate them; but it was really one rush from dawn to dark.

There were only four of us in the bunkhouse, for now most of the hired men were Japs, and had their own quarters. They also ate separately, as the Jap house-cook haughtily refused to serve his countrymen. One of my mates was a queer chap, supposed to have been a sailor, because his arms were elaborately tattooed. He was a vegetarian, wore spectacles and was very deaf. Harrowing in the fields he would go barefoot, and never wore a hat. His manner was curt and contemptuous, and, like many deaf people, he shouted when he spoke. It was rather amusing to hear him shouting at the boss, but he was a good worker and knew his job.

What interested me chiefly was that he read books on philosophy. He had one by Schopenhauer, and one evening, when he threw that author at me, I retorted with Nietzsche. The ensuing argument was listened to with gaping amazement by the others, who were everyday farmhands. After that he had more respect for me. It must have seemed droll to see two mucky men on a dung-heap discussing metaphysics. I called him the Philosopher.

As winter drew near, my duties almost doubled. The oats had been threshed, the silo cut, the apple bins filled. In the muddy fields the men were gathering the mangels. In the steady rain everyone went round in gunnysacks. The Great Misery had begun. Despite being sheltered much of the time, I wondered if I could face the winter. I thought longingly of the orange groves and the sunshine; but I had only a few dollars saved, so I must reconcile myself to be a super-choreboy.

A band of young cattle had come in and added to my troubles. I had to feed all the stock, tossing down hay from the hard-packed mows, cutting mangels to mix with bran, digging into the silo. I was kept on the jump, and my work was never done. There were the barns to clean out, and the cattle to be driven to the river twice daily. That was a scene of turmoil and confusion. Precedence depended on physical force. Scored and bleeding flanks testified to a horn used in a ripping upthrust. I had to keep the peace as best I could, without using violence.

There was also the bull to take to the grove. A huge black Holstein, he was surly and bad-tempered. I had to lead him by a rope through his nose ring, with the prongs of a pitchfork pointed at him. When we got to the grove I slipped the catch of his rope and backed off, keeping him at bay with the pitchfork.

This was how it was when we reached the beginning of December.

I was feeling rather despairful, and doubted if I could stick out the winter. Yet stoically I made up my mind that I must. Often I asked myself: "Where am I going? What is to become of me?" There was no answer. I was in a quagmire symbolized by the deep mud of the yard I ploughed through a hundred times a day. My future was as hopeless as the sodden grey sky that overhung me. And in the midst of misery I thought of sun-drenched valleys of purple sage; of mountains sheerly beautiful; of glowing fruit groves, and all that golden Arcadia of the South. Even if I were to become a tramp again, I would be better there. This bondage was too bitter. I was selling myself too dearly.

Yes, I was desperate. The gods were laughing at my plight. Would they ever give me a break? Surely I was geared for something better than mucking with the swine. Ground between the jaws of toil, I saw myself as a poor devil, unfit and unfound in the fierce struggle of existence. Utterly discouraged, I cursed the gods; then something occurred that changed the whole course of my destiny.

I have mentioned that our bunkhouse was occupied on the ground floor by a general store. Bill, the storekeeper, was a waggish youth, who used to come up of an evening and yarn entertainingly. For the most part I visioned him with his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth. He was the personification of nonchalant ease. One of his jobs was to cut the lawn. He would cut about three blades of grass, then stand five minutes admiring his effort. He would leave the store to take a pot-shot at some ducks sitting on the river, or standing on the bridge he would dangle a gut line, trying to foul hook some circling sea trout. As I watered the cows I would see him lounging on the porch of the store smoking his pipe. Lucky devil! Oh, to be in his shoes! . . . Then one evening I was writing my precious journal, and more than usually fed up with the whole business, when the Philosopher remarked: "Bill's leaving us."

"No! He must be crazy. I can't imagine anyone quitting a job like that."

"Yes, he's going into the mule-skinning business. Wonder who they'll get in his place."

The thought flashed into my mind: "Why not me?" Straight away I wrote a letter of application in my best hand, which, in spite of my hard work, was a pretty fine one. Then I posted it and felt rather excited. I said to the passing stream before I mounted to bed: "Old Man River, if this fails it's me for the orange belt again."

The next day something unpleasant happened. I was taking the

bull to the pasture and, having grown a little careless, I stuck my hayfork in the ground before unfastening the hasp on his nose ring. He was accustomed to see those steel prongs bristling in his face, and I suppose he missed them. He was bellowing and pawing as he always did when I unloosed him. I suppose he thought: Here is my tormenter helpless and at my mercy. Anyway, next moment I felt a violent impact and was thrown high in the air.

I remember sprawling on my back with a feeling of absolute helplessness, and that big, black bull towering over me. He was roaring savagely, and his head was half turned to gore me. I was lying near the fence and could have crawled under it, but I utterly lacked the strength. The brute had knocked all the wind out of me. I was incapable of thought. I just waited for that vicious hook that would disembowel me. Then I heard a tremendous shout and saw a man leap the fence. The bull saw him too. He turned to attend to his new tormenter. This was my chance. With a desperate effort I crawled through the fence to safety. It was the Philosopher who saved my life. He happened to be passing with a load of hay and, tumbling to the road, he dashed to my rescue. I said: "In acting so quickly you showed a presence of mind for which I shall be eternally grateful." And he said with a snarl: "Oh, damn you, cut it out." I had to be helped to bed, where I lay in great pain.

"Seems like my ribs are stove in," I said faintly. "I can't carry on." So a Jap took my job, and for two days I lay feeling forgotten and neglected. I believe two of my ribs were cracked, because for a long time after I could not bear to touch my side. Bitterly I thought: This puts the lid on it. I'm through with live stock for good.

While I was meditating morosely under my blankets, I was aware of someone standing over me. It was Bill. "Hurry up and get well," he said. "The boss wants you to check over the stock with me. He's giving you my job." I have had great moments in my life—when it seemed the gates of heaven opened wide and I stepped through them from the depths of hell. This was one of them. In all of these cases the emotion was "escape." A tide of happiness flooded me too deep for words. Lying there, I no longer cared for physical pain. I simmered in joy, trying not to realize my luck too suddenly. I let it seep in, gradually, almost grudgingly. I wanted to savour my happiness little by little. Then, what with dreaming and planning, I slept blissfully, and woke to the radiance of a new future.



## Chapter Two

### STOREKEEPER

ONCE again a white-collar man. How glad I was! I wanted to sing and dance. On Monday I was hustling sixteen hours a day. On Thursday I was watching others hustle and getting the same pay for it. Leaning against the store porch with pipe in mouth and hands in pockets, I was giving a creditable imitation of the late Bill. Warm and dry, I beheld another drive the stock to water, and tried to imagine that other was myself. It seemed too good to be true. Here I sat with the family, in a blue serge suit, eating in the dining-room, while through the intervening door of the kitchen I could see the farm hands in their grimy overalls gobbling down their food. For a long time, I am sorry to say, I got pleasure from this dolorous contrast. It is true that through the misery of others we appreciate our own well-being.

But it is also true that, though the change had been made in the twinkling of an eye, I was quick to fit myself to it. One day a rough-neck, the next a *bourgeois*, I played my new part with unction. After a few days of propping up the porch post, I found it hard to believe I had ever been doing anything more strenuous. Though my work was mainly meditative, there were active duties attached to it. Here was my routine:

At eight (instead of five-thirty), I arose and swept out the store. At eight-thirty I had breakfast in the dining-room. Taking my napkin out of its silver ring, I daintily toyed with eggs and bacon. At nine I opened the store and the Post Office. Smoking my pipe, I made up the mail, which I had to haul to the station. At nine-thirty I hitched up the pony to the wagon and started out. I collected the cans of cream on the stands along the way and delivered the mail bag at the station. Arriving at the creamery, I unloaded my cans of cream, saw them weighed, emptied and reloaded on my wagon. About eleven I started back, stopping at the station to collect the incoming mail. About twelve I arrived home, sorted the mail, distributed it and went to lunch. Thus I spent over two hours a day jogging behind a fat pony, smoking, meditating, and enjoying pleasant scenery. After lunch, sitting on a keg of nails, I would light my pipe and indulge in a digestive pause. Occasional customers came

in, but I would serve them without enthusiasm. Usually they were Siwashes from the nearby reservation. Our trade was mainly with the Indians, and our stock was crudely comprehensive.

Said Bill: "We sell everything from pins to chamber-pots." He pointed to a stack of the latter, discreetly stowed under the counter. "I never had the nerve to expose one," said Bill. "I'm a modest man, and the sight of them brings the blush to my cheek. You'll notice the ladies of the house ignore their existence. They're apparently invisible. Forget them." But I could not forget them. They haunted me. They reproached me for my neglect. They seemed to challenge me, saying: "We *are* useful under certain circumstances. Bring us to the light. Dust us; polish us; let the public judge our worthiness. You don't need to write a poem about us, but, for the love of Mike, give us a break."

So I polished them up, and getting some rose and baby-blue ribbon, I made dainty bows and attached them to the handles. Then I printed a large card: ETRUSCAN VASES, and set them on a shelf bang in the public eye. And, believe it or not, in a week I sold the lot.

My customers were Siwashes. They would gaze at them wonderingly. The women, especially, would seem intrigued. A fat klootchman would stare at them, no doubt attracted by the gay rosettes. "Him soup bowl?" she would ask.

"No," I would reply. "But of course they *could* be used for soup. Say, that's quite an idea. Why not? But really they are a variety of musical instrument." Then I would go to her Buck and whisper their real purpose in his ear, and in turn he would whisper in the ear of his wife, and they would double up with shrieks of laughter. In the end, in reply to the wheedling of the lady, the old man would dig up a dollar, and she would carry off the article in triumph.

After my first sale I pushed the stock at every opportunity. I advocated the utensils for marriage presents, for parlour ornaments, for coffee urns. I recommended them to young Indians as presents for their *fiancées*, and even for punch bowls on festive occasions. My stock vanished almost overnight, and the boss considered ordering a fresh consignment. But alas! it was my only success as a shopman. Even to-day it humiliates me to think that my one brilliant achievement in the commercial field should have been as an advocate of porcelain propriety.

For I must admit that, as a salesman, I again demonstrated my success as a failure. To be a good counter-jumper you must not only be able to sell folks things they want, but things they don't want. I never could bring myself to do that. It was bad enough handing out goods you knew were shoddy at twice their value. I see

myself helping a poor Indian into a grotesque suit and assuring him: "It feet you like ze paper on ze vall." Or selling a squaw a pair of shoes you knew were as resistant as cardboard.

I hated myself for doing these things. I was never tainted with sordid commercialism. If I had been obliged to sell my own books, I would have died in the gutter. If revulsion to business is a sign of the artistic temperament, then I must be really an artist. Yet at the job of petty huckstering, though I hated it, I carried on for four years. The reason is that I was at a new low as regards morale. Spiritually I was bruised, if not broken. Any haven was a heaven. Here I was, rather under than over worked. I was warm, well fed, dry. I was looked on by the family as one of themselves. Consideration by people of my own class was not wasted on me, and gratitude for that kindness made me prolong my stay from year to year. I had been handled harshly by the world, and taking up the struggle affrighted me. So I continued to follow lethargically the lovely line of least resistance.

My first task was to learn Chinook. This is the Hudson Bay jargon invented for trading over their vast territory. Even in our neighbourhood tribes had different speech and could not understand each other. A common tongue was necessary, and Chinook supplied it. It consisted of some three hundred key words. The verbs were used in the present tense, and the negative largely took the place of a new word to express the same idea. For instance, "bad" might be expressed by saying "no good," and so on. It dealt with the concrete for the most part. It was crude, almost childish, but it worked; and soon I became so fluent I could sling it out better than the Siwash themselves.

There were several tribes of Indians living around us, and there were a dozen stores eager for their custom. Most traders are robbers. I tried to be honest, giving fair weight and sometimes cutting prices. As an ex-socialist I disapproved of the profit motive in industry, and a hundred-per-cent. profit was not unusual in our business. Most of the trade was by barter. The chief mediums were grain, skins and trade blankets. The last item was regarded as cash, and real money was rare. The main needs of the Indians were flour, tea, sugar and tobacco. They also bought painkiller, which took the place of forbidden alcohol. Indeed, they would drink Jamaica ginger, ketchup, anything that gave them the stimulation of firewater.

My main duties, then, were to tend the store, keep the books, run to the Post Office, carry the mails, turn the cream separator, carry the cream to the creamery, keep the tennis court in shape, and do the butchering. This last job was one of which I am everlastingly ashamed. I was a good butcher, and during those years I must have

slaughtered hundreds of sheep and cattle. I could kill and dress a sheep in twelve minutes. I did not seem to mind it in those days, but now I think of it with horror. I feel I should suffer the tortures of hell for all the innocent life I have taken. With age one develops a sensitiveness to such things, and if to-day I am largely vegetarian, it is because I think of meat in terms of slaughter. I can still see the agony in the eyes of lambs and calves as I drew the keen blade across their throats.

One time, however, I had no need to reproach myself. A cow had fallen over a small bluff and broken its neck. When I got there the body was cold. The blood was black in the veins. Nevertheless, I skinned and dressed it, hauled it away and sold it to the butcher. He looked queerly at me; but he gave me a lower price, and it was duly eaten by a confiding public.

The store stood on the bank of the river. To the right on entering was the Post Office. Around one side and back was a counter. Behind the counter the dry goods began, then the shoes, then the shirts and underwear. The back of the store was devoted to groceries, medicines and candies. Outside of the counter were nail kegs and boxes of hardtack. There was a space for hardware, another for flour, and a table on which was piled cheap clothing.

The stove was of the barrel variety and sat in a bed of cinders. Above it hung a large oil lamp. Near it was a wooden stair mounting to an attic through a trap-door. Part of the attic had been partitioned off to form a small room. It held a bed, a table, two chairs. There was also a basin, a jug, a mirror. The bed had grey cotton blankets, but no sheets. The pillow slip was changed weekly. . . . All this I have described somewhat minutely, for it was to be my home for four years.

I still wonder if my term as a storekeeper should be put to the profit or loss side of life's ledger. I am inclined to think the latter. In that time I did not increase in stature either mentally or morally. I had an easy existence and enjoyed a lot of it. I recognized myself as a dreamer and a weakling. If I found a cushy hole, I was inclined to "stay pat." This is bad. Life is experience of living, and one should beware of stagnation. My days were rubber-stamp days, each year a stencil repeated from season to season. On the whole I regret this period as wasted time; but though I often resolved to break away, I was too cowardly and indolent to do so.

For indeed the life was mighty agreeable. I played tennis in the summer evenings and had a horse to ride whenever I wanted one. I had swimming and shooting and fishing to my heart's content. Socially I was in the swim—in demand for private theatricals and popular at dances. A year before, I had been wheedling for hand-

outs, so it may be understood how I allowed myself to be doped into pleasant but objectless existence.

Every season had its joys. In spring the cherry trees were snowed with blossom, and like winged jewels the humming-birds darted in and out. The bees swung on the purple clover, and the baby corn peeked out of the warm soil. The ardent sky called forth eager life. Haying and harvest painted pictures of mellow fruitfulness, and I could admire the idyllic side of country life. But though Nature at times filled me with the old ecstasy, I was never moved to express my feelings in writing. During those years I made no music and composed no verse. Such interests seemed to be latent; but I read many farm papers and considered myself an authority on agriculture. Farming is charming if one has not to work at it. To sing the praise of the Soil one's fingers must be unsoiled.

I loved the store on winter evenings when the lamp was lit and the stove aglow. But I was still happier when I closed it for the night and climbed to my room. There I would read till late, with my lamp on a chair beside the bed, serenely chewing a chocolate bar. I got books from the library, and must have read hundreds of novels in those days, though I cannot now remember a single title.

I had a bicycle, and every Saturday night I would go to a dance in the nearby town. I waltzed and two-stepped until midnight, then cycled home, feeling tired and happy. I used to devote myself to girls who were wallflowers. How often did I watch them arrive in the finery they had fashioned so lovingly, their eyes agleam with hope. But as the men crowded around the prettier girls, I could see their faces cloud with anxiety. Yet they would try to smile bravely. Then I would sail in to their rescue. I don't think I ever danced with a popular girl. I was too sensitive to the pathos of the wallflower and the cruelty of youth.

We had private theatricals too. We put on old stand-bys like *The Area Belle*, *Ici On Parle Français* and *Box and Cox*. I had some good parts and enjoyed rehearsals. I would work in front of a mirror; then on the night I would have a slug of Scotch in the wings, and play quite differently.

As regards shooting, in the woods were grouse and pheasant; but, better still, on the flats were flights of ducks—mallard, widgeon and teal. Sometimes the marsh pools would be dark with them, and on moonlight nights the air would be clamorous with their cries. Then I would sneak up and take a pot-shot, as they squatted in a silver pool.

The fishing was more to my taste. In summer I worked the river for trout, using salmon eggs, so that it was not long before I had a stringful. But my great joy was trolling for salmon. I had a

dug-out canoe, so narrow one could just squeeze into the seat, and so tippy only an adept could keep it balanced. Once you got the hang of it, however, it was as if the canoe was part of you. But it had the advantage that it was unsinkable. If you upset you could joggle out the water and climb in again. I have often done this in the deep water of the bay, shaking out the sea, and by a trick of balance vaulting into my cockle-shell craft. This ability gave me tremendous confidence, so that I used to go out in the stormiest weather.

Trolling on the bay I could get many fine fish. In the early dawn I would paddle back and forth, a line round my wrist with a spoon at the end. Oh, the joy of those early mornings on the swinging sea, with a big, gleamy fish on my hook! All around me salmon would be leaping, falling with vicious slaps on the waves, to rid themselves of the lice that clung to their purple-grey backs. And, oh, the thick salmon steaks I would eat for breakfast, with a fisherman's appetite!

Later on, the salmon would come up the river. There would be such masses of them they would almost choke the stream. Crossing with a wagon I have been obliged to stop and pull out wriggling fish jammed in the wheels. The banks would be paved with them. In their frantic effort to get upstream they seemed to lose all sense of fear. I have even seen one climb a tree. It is true the trunk was half submerged, but the salmon had wriggled its own length out of the water on the dry bark.

Higher up, the Indians had built a fish trap. They made a grill of willow rods stretched across the river, leaving only a narrow passage in midstream. There they speared the fish that passed through. Below this barrier the water would be a boiling cauldron of fighting salmon, packed in what seemed almost a solid mass. After the run the banks would be littered with dead fish, poisoning the air with the odour of decay.

What a pleasant life it was! Yet on my fourth year I ran into a spot of trouble. Among the storekeepers there was great competition for the trade of the Indians. Indeed, some of them were suspected of selling whisky to get custom. It was so easy to slip a flask of rum into a sack of flour. Dozens of times I was begged for just one little bottle by a Siwash, who in return offered to spend ten dollars in the store. When I refused, he took his trade to another, where the proprietor had less scruple. So I used to see old customers passing our door in their wagons, and returning laden with flour and groceries. It gave me a nasty shock. Besides this, there was a cut-price war on. Some of the traders were selling flour at cost, and getting back their profit on other articles. At best I disliked business,

but competitive business repelled me; so with distress I watched our custom dwindling. There was nothing I could do about it. I was never a fighter; I wasn't even a good salesman. Defeat was the only possible issue, and defeat it was.

Soon I was lucky to get half a dozen customers a day. From thinking them rather a bore, I became pathetically eager to please them. I beheld perishable articles going bad on the shelves. As no one bought my chocolate bars, I had to buy them myself. With what misery I watched my customers deserting me! With what dismay I saw the stock going stale! So, worrying and disconsolate, I passed the fourth year of storekeeping.

And at the same time my conscience began to catch up with me. I saw clearly that my easy life was not getting me anywhere. I felt a slacker, a bit of a waster. I was approaching middle age, and I realized with a shock that my position in the world was negligible. I was a square peg in a succession of round holes. I must find a job that suited me. Yet, oh, the misery of licking a man's boots to let him exploit me! Let me put off that evil moment as long as I could.

One day as I was brooding darkly over my fate an old mossback entered with a lard tin full of eggs. He was silver-haired, gnarled and stooped, but he had been one of the early pioneers.

"A dozen hen-fruit, Dad," I said. "That'll be two-bits."

"Right, Son. Reckon I'll take it in sugar."

So I gave him such good weight that the scale went down with a bump. "That's the way to please 'em," I thought. "Be just *and* generous." He was so well satisfied he bought a ten-cent plug of chewing tobacco. Sitting by the stove he bit off a mouthful and expectorated into the ashes. Just at that moment a fat klootchman came in. She pointed to a roll of black elastic, and indicated by signs that she wanted enough for a pair of garters.

"Perhaps, Madame, I had better take your measure," I said politely. She pulled up her skirt and I measured her leg just above the knee.

"Go easy, Son," said the old mossback. "Remember you ain't a-scalin' a log." He watched me with interest. I had a yard space marked out on the inner edge of the counter, and now I measured the elastic by it. As the woman paid me and went her way, the old man remarked: "Say, ye mighta stretched that there elastic when ye measured it off. Give her two feet for a yard. She'd never have knowed it."

"I wouldn't cheat the poor devils," I said. "My conscience is not for sale—not for ten cents anyway."

"That's the trouble with you, Son. You're too honest for a store-keeper. Why, you mighta short-weighted me on that sugar, and I'd

never have known no different with my old eyes. Say, you jest ain't a-fitted with this job. What you want's to git ahead of people. That's what all them business folks does. You'll never make a trader. Why don't you try something more in your line?"

"Now you're talking, Dad. But what?" His eyes wandered to the books on my desk, and he scratched his head. Then he expectorated copiously, wiping with the back of his hand the brown fleck from his silvery whiskers.

"Well, you're book-learned. You're a bit of a scholard to my thinkin'. Why not go school-teachin'. Bein' so honest you'd make a good teacher."

I stared at him. "Now you've said something. I'll think it over, Dad. Maybe you're right. Anyway, thanks a lot for the idea." As he hobbled away I sat for a spell in deep thought. Yes, he'd said something.



## Chapter Three

### STUDENT

MY new idea came to me with the force of an inspiration. It had been a long time since I had conceived myself in a fresh rôle. I had come to accept the shabby one Fate had handed out to me, but this was different. From a blanket-stiff I had climbed to white-collarism; now I was going to mount to a profession. Here was something to fight for. Once again my heart exulted. I had been depressed, but I was not flattened out. As I drove the cream wagon I said tensely: "I *will* succeed. I *WILL*."

And at that very moment I again demonstrated my capacity for failure. Though fat, the pony I drove was high-mettled. As I loaded and unloaded my cans, I had to hitch her to the milk stand. But I was so taken up with my Great Idea that on this occasion I failed to do so. As I was hoisting a heavy can of cream aboard, she bolted. The can went crashing on the road, flooding it with pools of Jersey cream, while at full speed my steed galloped madly on. The wagon swung from side to side; the cream cans jolted and swayed. Some Siwashes, driving a team, frantically pulled into the ditch, and their own horses took fright. A gang of Chinese shouted and scattered at my approach. It is bad to be in the way of a maddened horse, but it is worse to be behind, especially when you have no means of controlling it. For the reins had been pulled loose and were streaming on the road.

Fortunately at that point the highway was long and straight. I foresaw calamity, and decided on a desperate effort. If I could only get hold of those lines streaking through the dust! . . . Quickly I climbed over the dash-board on to the shafts, and flung myself forward. Reaching out I gripped the reins at the point where they went through the rings of the collar. I almost yanked the little brute on her haunches, as I pulled with all my strength, and finally brought her to a standstill. For a circus artist it would have been child's play, but I was inclined to be proud of my smartness. However, any tendency to swank was subdued, as I was obliged to pay two dollars and fifty cents for the spilled cream.

This incident decided me that I was fed up with both farming and Siwash trading. True, I loved the old store, with its mingled

odour of spice and mice, its big-bellied stove, where I dozed and dreamed, its porch post I draped so indolently. But I hated the buying and selling, and I loathed the arid forms of the Post Office. Well, my destiny was neither in trade nor bureaucracy. I now saw myself as a pedagogue, guiding the young idea how to square-shoot. I did not reflect that I might be unsuited even for that. Since then I have decided that I would have been. A teacher's lot is one of patient drudgery, and I would have detested it in the end.

However, as I dreamed, I began to see myself in an even more ambitious rôle. Why be a rural dominie? Why not an urban professor? I saw myself in a frock coat with a gold Albert across a rounded waistcoat. The foundation of dignity is a gold-chain belly, and probably its origin. Maybe I could develop one and become dignified. But perhaps I could develop something else—a new system of education, based on the idea of developing the individual. I would teach science instead of the classics. I would preach practical instruction. But if I were to attack the higher grades of the profession, I would need a university degree. Well, why not? There, at last, was an ambition worthy of me. I would go to college and become a master of arts. Perhaps by working in summer I could pay my way in winter. Many did. The hope was a shining light to me; the inspiration a gleaming spur.

Feeling joyously awakened, I began to work for my new goal. No more fiction reading, just books necessary for my matriculation exam. Every night I worked on them, often falling asleep as I studied. Then rousing up I would make another stab at it. I goaded myself awake and stoked my mind with long-forgotten facts. But I made a painful discovery—I had lost the knack of study. My mind rebelled against the absorption of distasteful knowledge. It was tough work, yet doggedly I stuck to it.

Also I had to save money. No more chocolate bars and sweet biscuits. Except for tobacco, laundry and necessary clothing, I did not spend a penny. So far I had put little aside. I had taken the job at fifteen dollars a month—five less than the nonchalant Bill; and my inferiority complex had always prevented me asking for more. Time and again I had tried, but the words had stuck in my throat. Probably, instead of a raise, I would have got the sack, which might have been a good thing. But as time went on I decided I was not worth more than fifteen, and let it go at that. Still, it is not easy to save on such a salary, and in those days I learned economy the hard way. By self-denial I saved cent by cent. Little by little my balance crept up; then when I had two hundred dollars at my credit, I gave notice.

Said the boss: "Do you mean to say you are leaving us, after

resting so long?" Even a rest cure has its limits, I thought, and I nodded mournfully. He refused to look over the account I had made out against myself, and wrote me a cheque. I was grateful for his tribute to my honesty. He was an unusually fine man, a pioneer and a fighter. He had advanced ideas on agriculture, and did more for farming than anyone in the country.

With regret I said good-bye to my little room. I had enjoyed peace there. I looked for the last time at the grey blankets of my humble bed. Incidentally, they hadn't been washed during all my stay. I said farewell to the family of about a dozen sons, all grand fellows, whom I had seen grow up. I hope luck followed them in life.

A friend had loaned me his shack where I could be quiet for two months and swat up for my exam. Then a road boss promised me a job for another two months. This would bring me to the fall and the date of my exam. The road job would pay for the time I had spent in study, and thus I would arrive for my exam with my two hundred dollars intact. Such my calculations, as I settled down with my text-books and a plentiful supply of midnight oil.

But I had not reckoned with the thousands of fleas that infested the shack. They were cat fleas and, though they did not bite, they tickled unbearably. As I studied I scratched, and as I scratched I tried to study. Then I gave up and took to the woods. But study in the open air was subject to many distractions, so I was driven back to my flea-infested retreat. I was in despair. I thought I would have to find another refuge, when suddenly my lively companions completely disappeared. In a single day they vanished, leaving me at a loss to explain their departure.

However, if I thought I was going to settle down to study, I was mistaken. I found it impossible to concentrate for any length of time. The smallest distraction would set me dreaming. I had never been a student and it seemed too late to learn. Besides, I hated most of my subjects. Let me recapitulate them:

*English Literature*—easy.

*Canadian History*—dull but not difficult.

*French*—remembering the days when I had translated *La Vie de Bohème*, I had no doubt I could fluke through it.

*Arithmetic*—a little common sense would solve any problem.

*Euclid*—I could get it up by memorizing the problems.

*Algebra*—there was the rub. I had always loathed the subject, and now I was compelled to plunge into its mazes more deeply than ever.

*Latin*—here too I struck a snag. Latin grammar had always nauseated me. But I got two good cribs, one of Cæsar and one of Ovid, and tried to memorize the translation.

What uphill work it was! I found it hard to keep my mind on my books. Often I wanted to throw the hated things out of the

window and write mad sonnets to the moon. However, all I wrote was a three-verse lyric. It came as easy as eating pie. It was one night I was so disgusted with my algebra I began pacing up and down the glade before the shack. The moon hung high above the pines, and its serene light seemed to solace me. It said: "Don't worry. All will come right, but you're on the wrong track. It's writing you should be, not bothering your brain with bloodless abstractions." Then the moon whispered a poem in my ear and I put it on paper. I sent it to *Munsey's Magazine*, not even hoping for acceptance; but two months later it was printed, and I received a cheque for five dollars. Five dollars for half an hour's work! Five dollars for filling only a page of Munsey's! Was that not wonderful? How far ahead of the half-dollar I had been paid by *Scottish Nights*. Can it be wondered I was elated, and my heart went out in gratitude to munificent Mr. Munsey?

Oh, that those sunny days in my shack should have been poisoned by sordid study! I have always hated to acquire knowledge consciously. I prefer to absorb it through my senses. That is why I have remained ignorant of my ignorance. Now, as I tried to cram up on these stupid books, I felt more and more the pull of poetry. But I stuck doggedly to my work, only breaking off for meals. Then I would grab Rossetti or Swinburne and read avidly as I ate. That summer the creative impulse was in me, but I could not take advantage of it. Instead of trifling with Euclid, I should have been writing sonnets.

When the time came to begin my work on the roads I was glad of the change. "Take it easy and make the job last. Remember you're employed by the Government." That's what the road boss told me, and I even improved on his advice. My mates were small settlers, who had cleared an acre or two, and counted on this work to provide them with groceries and clothing. What with hunting, fishing, a garden and chickens, they lived the independent life I had always dreamed of.

At night in my little tent I got out my books and tried to study by the light of a candle. Beyond the tops of the tall pines I could see the stars, and they seemed to be looking down on a poor devil trying to pull himself up by his boot straps. It was a sorry business, but I made a heroic effort, and only overpowering fatigue defeated me. Summer passed as I worked, grading, mending culverts, chopping brush. We were on a little-used by-way, almost a trail. It ran through groves of giant pines; the bush was rich with berries, and I picked them as I swung an axe or heaved a shovel. Often I wished I could enjoy these woods in the glory of the early fall, and I envied my mates their bits of earth and their independence.

Then that episode came to an end. I was paid off and left the settlement for good. I have never returned. One does not care to be reminded of bitter struggle and defeat. But even more, one wants to avoid the memory of humiliation. If I went back I should see the ghost of my dead self eating the husks of abasement, as I strove to regain a decent place in society.

When I reached the city where I had to take my exam I had two hundred dollars in my pocket. This, I calculated, should do me for six months, by which time the college term would be closed, and I would be free to earn enough for the following year. I had only vague ideas as to how this could be done. Indeed my whole future was based on innocent hope.

At first I went to a boarding-house where I paid thirty dollars a month. It was not dear, but I soon found it was making heavy inroads into my capital, and I took a small room in a private house at fifteen dollars a month. So by cutting down my food to semi-starvation point, I was able to save five dollars on my monthly budget.

In due course I took my examination. It lasted three days and I suffered from the strain. In some of the papers I thought I did well, but in others I was conscious I was bluffing. The last was in algebra at nine on a bleak Friday morning. As soon as I received my paper I knew it was hopeless. Each of the eight questions was so utterly beyond me, it gave me a queer feeling of satisfaction. What devilish mockery shouted from that paper! Rising I handed it back to the examiner.

"Thank God!" I said bitterly, "no one will ever convict me of a mathematical mind."

He was quite sympathetic. As I walked to the door, the others stopped their work and, with pens poised, looked at me. I felt ashamed, till I realized that the expression on their faces was wonder. They thought I had finished my paper and that I must be a star of the first magnitude. For a moment I basked in their admiration, then ignominiously vanished. After waiting a week I went to learn my fate. The Head received me cordially. The results were curious and interesting:

*Arithmetic:* One hundred per cent.

*Literature:* Ninety per cent.

*Euclid and Latin:* I had just scraped through by a mark or two. Those memorized problems and cribbed translations had saved me.

*Canadian History:* Seventy per cent.

*Algebra:* Nothing, of course.

*French:* When the Head came to the French paper he looked at me thoughtfully. I thought I had done pretty well in this subject.

My translations, if to the free side, were almost better than the original. This, I considered, should balance my blissful ignorance of grammar.

"Your French paper," said the Head solemnly, "has gained you exactly one mark."

I was amazed, indignant. "Why *one*?" I demanded. "What particular merit in my paper has netted me that one magnificent mark?"

He shrugged his shoulders and refused to commit himself. But I could read his thoughts. He was saying to himself: "That French Canadian examiner is jealous of the prestige of French Canada. Like all his countrymen he dislikes the British Canadian. He sees in you one of them who is trying to bluff, and he is determined to give the fourflusher a lesson. He knows your French is phony, but instead of utterly repudiating your paper, he shows his contempt by giving you one mark. It is like the farthing damages in a lawsuit. . . ." This is what the Head should have told me, knowing as he did the pompous professor who examined in French. But I felt a surge of rage. If I had met the man who gave me one mark, I would have given him one mark too—on his plump posterior.

The Head, who specialized in literature, was interested in my English paper and wanted me to go on. He said: "You will have to pass a supplementary examination in the two subjects in which you have failed, but during the term you should be able to work them up easily enough." I did not share his optimism. However, I was glad to enrol in the course which covered the first year at McGill, so I told him I would do my best.

The classes consisted of a dozen boys just graduated from high school, and all about half my age. I felt stupid and out of place. They were well dressed, while my clothes were worn and shabby. Accordingly I resolved that a new outfit would be a good investment. It would raise my *morale*, which at that moment sadly needed bucking up. So I ordered a blue serge suit and an overcoat. I also needed shirts, shoes, underclothing. Once started I had to go on. When I had rigged myself out from socks to stetson, I found my funds diminished by nearly a hundred dollars. Yet I *did* put up a good front, and as a university student I felt worthy of the Great McGill.

My satisfaction, however, was short-lived. With a sense of horror I realized I was working on my last hundred dollars. Indeed, my text-books put another crimp in that sum. By the time I had begun my classes, I had only sixty dollars left—enough, with rigid economy, to last me two months. What would happen after that I did not dare to think. I could only carry on, hoping something would turn up to save me. . . .

I soon discovered that in my classes I had a hard row to hoe. The boys around me were quick and receptive. Alongside them I was obtuse and slow. They lapped up knowledge my brain resented. My mind seemed to tell me: "All these subjects, Latin, mathematics, physics, revolt me, yet you insist on forcing them on me. You are putting yourself in a false position with these kids. Once more you are proving yourself an also-ran."

And indeed I was. Despite my frantic efforts, I was falling behind the others. What was play to them I achieved with pain. From the classes I went straight to my room and studied far into the night, yet each day only seemed to expose my inferiority. The Masters realized what I was up against and showed sympathy, but I felt I was reaching the limit of my powers. My room was cold, I was underfed, I was worn with worry. Yet, thanks to my new clothes, I had a smart look, and it was hard to believe I was living on the ragged edge.

Then one morning the breakdown came. I had my usual breakfast of bread and coffee and rose heavily to go to class. It was a radiant morning, but my heart was sad. The sun greeted me with a friendly smile and the sky was blue with hope. I sniffed the fresh breeze from the sea, and I looked wistfully at the pines of the park. So, instead of going to the class-room, I found myself walking wildly in the woods. I was playing truant. I was dismayed at what I was doing, but I could not help myself. I walked round and round the park, walked for hours and hours till I was completely played out. Then I went to a good restaurant, and for the first time in months I had a real meal.

That night in my room I had a fit of bitter remorse. My books stared so reproachfully at me, I vowed I would go back to school in the morning, yet I knew I never would. I was licked, miserably licked. Nerve-racked and exhausted, I passed a sleepless night, but next morning I found a grim exultation in the thought that never again would I sit in my classes. My university career was over.

I had enough money to keep me for a week or two, and I pondered what to do. I was indeed a failure. I had tried to storm the citadel of decent society, and been thrown into the ditch. Because I had not enough stamina to be a labourer, I would have to go back to the farm. A hired man at the age of thirty! I had made a nice mess of life. To what shabby fate was I drifting? I tasted the dregs of defeat and felt cast into the outer darkness.

I answered advertisements, but the mildest rebuff would discourage me for days. Where many would have drowned their despair in drink, I took it out in savage exercise. I walked till I was physically exhausted. Many of these tramps I made by night, preferably by

moonlight. Then a certain peace and serenity would come to me, and I would imagine all the jobs I could have enjoyed doing. Here are some of them:

A ragtime kid in a honky-tonk.

A rose gardener.

A Parisian *apache*.

A librarian.

A rural delivery postman.

A herring fisherman.

Enough to show the futility of my nature. Yes, I was a trifle with life, a minion of the Moon, whose silver emptiness mocked me. What a muck I had made of things, and now I was at the end of my tether.



## Chapter Four

### BANK CLERK

"THAT puts the lid on it," I said gloomily. "I'm sunk." I had just applied for a clerkship, and a pert stenographer had told me: "Sorry, but we only wanted an office boy." Yet I think I would have taken that if it had been available. However, I thanked her, and retired with a dignity that masked my chagrin. Now I was standing at the corner of a very busy street. I bent to look at my watch, then remembered I had pawned it and was living on the proceeds. But no one would have suspected this, for I was wearing my new suit and seeming quite smart. Yet it was my darkest hour. Where now was that guardian angel who had always interposed to save me in my extremities?

"Hullo, there, young fellow." I heard a hearty voice. "What are you doing in the big burg?" It was a traveller for biscuits whom I had known in my storekeeping days.

"Looking for a job," I said glumly.

"Huh! What's your special line?"

"I was trained as a bank clerk."

"Well, what's the matter with the bank you're looking at? Ain't it good enough for you?"

"Good! It's a palace. I daren't go in there. I'd be scared they'd throw me out. You can't get back into a bank once you're out. At least, it's like that in Scotland."

"It isn't like that over here. Go in and tackle them, anyway."

I thanked him, and as he went away, wishing me good luck, he never knew the vital part he had played in my destiny. Again I looked at the bank, and no sinner ever gazed more longingly through the gates of Paradise. Then I took from my pocket that old testimonial from my Scotch Bank Manager. It was worn and soiled. Somehow I had preserved it, and now I clung to it as a drowning man clings to a life-buoy. Holding it in my hand I marched through the imposing doorway. I saw a wicket marked *Accountant*, and I approached it fearfully. A stern-faced young man looked down at me. Handing him my dog-eared testimonial, I said huskily: "I want to apply for a job." Strange! He did not stare contemptuously at me. He did not turn me away, as so many had done. Instead, he

said rather kindly: "You'd better see the Inspector. You'll find him in his room upstairs."

Clutching my precious document I knocked, and another stern-faced young man received me. Presenting my certificate I faltered my plea. He left me and went into a private room. Presently he returned. "The Inspector will see you," he said kindly.

A gruff, grey man was sitting at a desk. With a keen scrutiny he looked me over. "Why did you come to Canada?"

"To learn farming," I said. "But I have had enough of it and want to get back into a bank."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven." This was understating my age by two years, but I judged it prudent.

"Well, we don't often take on men as old as you, but I feel like giving you a chance on the strength of this testimonial. However, you will have to obtain three sponsors." I did some rapid thinking. I gave him three names. He took them down, saying brusquely: "Come back in a week's time and we will have answers to our inquiries."

Going home I wrote to my three references, begging them to say a good word for me. I did not dare to hope to any extent, but I avoided facing the dreadful dilemma of failure. I felt this was my last chance. I walked a good deal. I ate as little as possible. I kept spruce and neat. But though I smiled cheerfully, anxiety rowelled me. Then the week passed and once more I went to see the Inspector. At once I was aware of a change in his manner. This frosty man had thawed toward me. Though obliged to sustain his official front, there was a gleam of human feeling behind it.

"Well, we are satisfied with the reports about you," he said briskly. "And we have decided to give you a trial. Of course your appointment will only be temporary; but if you are satisfactory after six months, we will put you on the permanent staff. In the meantime we will pay you fifty dollars a month."

"Fifty dollars," I faltered.

"Yes, is that not enough?"

"Too much," I answered with conviction. "I will willingly work for twenty-five. I'm Scotch. I could get along on that. Twenty-five will be all right."

"No matter how Scotch you are you cannot live on twenty-five dollars a month," he answered with decision. "No, it's fifty or nothing."

"I'll accept fifty," I answered meekly.

"Report on Monday at our Island Office," he snapped. Then returning me my certificate he dismissed me abruptly. . . . It had happened in the twinkling of an eye. This gruff, grey man had

suddenly sprouted wings. I was walking on air. The hostile street was now all banners and music. I wanted to shout: "I have a job again, a JOB. A real steady job." But when I realized how chancy it had all been, I knew fear. Three things had helped me, and if either had been wanting, I would have failed. There was my smart suit and my fitness; there was my certificate, which I had preserved in all my vicissitudes; and there was the arrival at the crucial moment of the biscuit drummer. On what accidents do our destinies depend! What seeming trifles may change our entire lives! How we are at the mercy of the insignificant!

Anyway I need not worry about all that. Once more I was a "bank man," and in this country, where bankers were the aristocrats of the business world, that meant a lot. I was safe; I was respectable. I was a worthy member of society. Behold one of the happiest moments of my life! I had been plunged into the depths, now I soared to the heights. As I walked the streets that only a few minutes before had seemed so cruel, I loved the whole world; I wanted to proclaim my joy to the stars. . . .

When I took the Island boat I was down to my last half-dollar. But my luck held, for I fell into talk with a draper from Dundee. Perhaps my story struck a sympathetic chord in him, for he said: "If a ten spot's any good to you . . . well, you know how it is. You would do the same for me if I was strapped."

Even as I turned the solitary coin in my pocket, I refused; but when he offered to sponsor me to the landlady of his boarding-house, I gladly accepted. So that evening I sat at a gleeful table and joined a dozen young people in a feast of roast pork and raisin pie.

Mac, my new friend, was a merry boy, laughing at life as if it were a huge joke. "There's no' a room left," he told me, "but come on, I'll find ye one. I'm a spiritualist, and I'll take ye to a friend of mine that's a medium. She's a bonnie wee lassie." Chuckling, he took me to a gloomy-looking house. "It's haunted by speerits, but ye won't mind that. Meet Mrs. Preece, the well-known clairvoyant."

The fattest woman I had ever seen stood in the doorway. Her chins were like organ pipes, and the tones that emerged were sonorous. Piercingly she looked at me.

"Yes, I have a room. It will be fifty cents—paid in advance."

"There! I told you she was a clairvoyant," sniggered Mac. "She's divined that half-dollar in yer pooch. She's no' takin' any chances. Well, come round for breakfast in the morning."

Perhaps the atmosphere was spirit-haunted, for I spent a haggard night. The only time I had worse dreams was on a trip down the Clyde on a paddle steamer. On the boat were a number of men, dressed in solemn black, sustaining each other with wee nips from

pocket flasks. Feeling sleepy, I stretched full length on a wooden chest in the shadow of the poop. But I had such dreadful dreams. Their appalling horror woke me up, and I saw that two of the men in black were grinning at me. Others passed, and all seemed to hide a secret mirth. Then one who looked like a minister came on the scene, and said to me in a shocked whisper: "We're taking auld Wullie McCrakin hame tae be berrit."

"What about it?"

"Well, don't ye see, that box . . . man, ye're lyin' on top of auld Wullie's *corpse*."

A ham and egg breakfast cheered me somewhat, and I proceeded to the bank. I approved of it at first sight. I wanted to tell the passers-by: "Here's where I work. Isn't it a noble establishment?" But it was only eight o'clock and few people were about, so my proud satisfaction passed unperceived. Then a porter arrived with the morning mail; clerks dribbled in; the Accountant bustled to his box. Giving me a short nod, he began to slice open the letters on his desk. After which he introduced me to several members of the staff, and I saw them sizing me up. I thanked God for my new suit.

My luck continued, for the Accountant called me over. "One of the privileges of the junior senior in the office is to sleep in the guard room. We have a nice apartment above the bank, and it falls to you. Can you arrange to accept it?"

I told him I thought I could, and the affair was settled. How beautifully all my troubles were being ironed out! As I took possession of my new quarters, I did a dance of delight. There was a nicely furnished sitting-room, a bedroom and a bathroom. Beside the bed was a small table, on which lay a loaded revolver, and a trap-door which gave on the vault. I was supposed to wake up at the smallest noise, to pop off possible burglars. However, I did not take this duty very seriously, and after the first week it would have taken a charge of nitroglycerine to arouse me.

That night, as I lay in my dainty bed, with real linen sheets, I meditated: "The tide has turned. After seven years of struggle I am in the same position I was in when I left the old country. I have descended to the bottom of the social ladder, and I have climbed it again. I have fought my way up from the gutter. Now I am done with romantic dreams and lust for adventure. I am going to be a nice fat little banker. I will not let down the kind Inspector who has given me my chance, and I will yield my devoted loyalty to this paternal institution that has taken me under its wing."

And in the days that followed I was so keen to give satisfaction, I almost gave dissatisfaction. The Accountant said to me: "I see

you working late sometimes. I don't like to see men in the office after hours. Speed up your work and get out in good time." Good advice, but I was finding it hard to take up banking where I had left off. I was rusty, and, above all, slow. In the old country work was leisurely; here it was done with a rush. It was more important to be quick than to be neat, most important to be accurate. I was neat and fairly correct, but I realized I could never be a fast worker. I was too incurably a dreamer to concentrate on figures.

As to working late, I returned after supper because I loved the office. It was handsome, spacious, dignified, and I was proud to belong to it. So I went there every evening for a quiet smoke, and if any of the other boys were working late, I was glad to give them a hand.

After paying my board I had now thirty dollars a month to spend on myself. My first expense was to hire a piano. I had it installed in my sitting-room. By playing fifths with my right hand and octaves with the left, I was able to make music of a kind that at least pleased myself. I also sang my own songs, and though my accompaniment was fumbling it seemed to go over with the boys who visited me of an evening.

My second expense was for a dinner jacket. Although I bought it ready-made, it fitted me better than a tailor could have done. I had to have it because I was being asked out with others of the staff, and I had to hold up my end. In the old country bank clerks were nobodies, but here they were the backbone of society. During the next six months I attended many parties and dances. I went to the theatre in evening dress and played golf costumed for the game. I found it paid to be well groomed, so I spent most of my spare money on clothes. I frequented two classes of society, my friends in the bank and my friends in the boarding-house. I preferred the latter. They might be common, but they were more fun. Most of them worked in shops and would have been looked down on by the bank crowd. However, I adjusted myself to both.

Of the plebeians, Mac the draper was the most attractive. He was always gay and full of pranks. I think he was a spiritualist for the fun of the thing, for I could see nothing mystical in his make-up. Despite my prejudice against spooks, I let him take me to a *séance*. He introduced me as an ardent believer, and vanished, leaving me in the hands of half a dozen hysterical women. After a little we formed a circle, putting out the light and masking the fire, because the medium said her controls preferred obscurity. Outside, the worst storm of the year was raging. The wind rattled the windows and howled around the house. In the room an eerie atmosphere developed that made me strangely uneasy. I wanted to escape, but a rather attractive little woman was gripping my hand, with nervous vibra-

tions running down her arm. I was just wondering what would happen if I tried to pinch her thigh, when the medium, who had gone into a trance, began to demonstrate. A deep, guttural voice came from her lips.

"I see a silvery-haired old gentleman hovering over us. He has the look of a retired army officer. He is gazing at the gentleman in our circle. He goes close to him. He pats him on the head. He pulls his ear."

I felt it would be only the decent thing not to let her down, so I said in a hollow voice: "It must be Uncle Bob from Burma. He used to pull my ear."

This invention made a great impression on the circle, and I felt my female partner squeeze my hand. I was again wondering if a little reassuring pinch on the thigh would be amiss, when the medium began to choke and gurgle. Her hands beat the air. She made the gesture of someone swimming desperately. Outside, the storm howled with fury, while in the room the atmosphere was tense. The medium was giving a realistic impersonation of a drowning woman. She shrieked for aid, clawed, retched, gasped painfully. In the faint firelight it was fairly horrible. . . . Then suddenly she subsided, quite exhausted. I felt sick, so, profiting by the confusion, I stole away.

How good it seemed to get into the clean air again! I made my way to a restaurant, and a steak and coffee somewhat cheered me. But all night I was haunted by the memory of that dreadful circle. In the morning I met our chief messenger. "Have you heard the news?" he said excitedly. "The *Clallam* went down last night, just outside the harbour. Over a hundred are drowned."

When I got to the bank they were bringing in bodies and laying them on the floor of a furniture store next door. At lunch-time I went in and looked at some thirty cadavers. Their faces had a dreadful calm, but what I remembered most was a row of boots and shoes, soft, soggy, shapeless. I had no appetite for lunch. However, Mac greeted me gleefully. The spiritualists were triumphant over the success of their meeting, and claimed to have been visited by the spirits of the drowned. I objected, saying it was only suggestion and coincidence; but, remembering Uncle Bob from Burma, I never went to another *séance*.

When I had been in the office five months we had an inspection, and one morning the Inspector came to me, holding in his hand a draft I had written. He said: "You are a good writer, and this is what we call at Head Office a picture draft. But if you had to write a hundred a day you could not do it in that vertical writing. I advise you to cultivate a sloping style."

I took his advice. I practised writing for hours. In those days penmanship seemed to me more important than literary composition. I was desperately anxious to please, for my appointment had not yet been made permanent. I need not have worried, however. Soon after I was received on the regular staff and given a ten-dollar-a-month increase. That was one of the proud days of my career. How wonderful it was to be a bank official!

Then one day the Accountant told me I was being transferred to an inland town. I went with regret. I had never gotten over my first exultation at working in that office. I regretted my apartment, my piano, my friends. Every day of my life there I had congratulated myself on my good luck. Well, perhaps my new post would be equally enjoyable.

It was even more agreeable—a town in the heart of the cattle country, with a river running alongside and cattle ranges all around. On account of the bracing air, it was recommended for consumptives. Indeed, it was said the bank sent suspected lungers there. However, that was not my case, for I was in the pink.

One of my first acts was to buy a pony and to take up polo. The latter was pure swank. I hated the game and never could hit the ball with certainty. However, I got photographed in my polo costume and sent a copy to Papa. Playing that most aristocratic of games was even more impressive than touring Mexico. I could hear the old man telling the world his son was a prominent official in a big Canadian bank.

The prominent official was responsible for a large ledger, which he balanced with exceeding difficulty every month end. There were three other officials. The Teller and the Accountant were suspected lungers. The former was a pink-faced youth who was short of breath; the latter a cadaverous man with a hollow voice. We had rooms above the bank, and a mess, with a Chinese cook.

Life was pleasant, and the work was light. At four o'clock we were on our horses, riding over the rolling ridges, or into spectral gulches that rose to ghostlier mountains. It was like the scenery of Mexico, weirdly desolate and aridly morose. A discouraged land, forbidding in its weariness and resigned to ruin. I loved to ride alone. The world seen from horseback is finer than that of the pedestrian. His mount adds to his self-esteem, so that he may feel regal even in rags. I often met Indians, superb horsemen, and so superior to the wretched Siwashes. I made friends among the cattle ranchers. They gave dances in their lonely homes, and we would ride back in the early hours of the morning.

Here, as everywhere, was the same social distinction. Our set comprised the Government crowd, the professional men and the old

country ranchers. We in the bank kept aloof from the tradespeople. At public dances it was curious to see on one side of the hall the shopkeeping crowd, and on the other the so-called *élite*. I never dared to dance with girls who worked in stores, though I wanted to, because they were the prettiest. But to have done so would have queerred me with my own set.

I bought a banjo, tuned it like a guitar, and strummed happily. During these years I scarcely ever read a book. Literature ceased to exist as far as I was concerned. My sense of poetry, so strong in my poverty and my desert wanderings, now seemed to have deserted me. My whole ambition was to get on in the bank, and I was prepared to give it my lifelong loyalty. I knew I was not suited for the job; yet I had no hope in any other direction, and I was intensely grateful for the safety and social standing it offered. Again and again I determined to make good. Other men had the same resolve to advance, but they had the bureaucratic mind that goes with it. I never would have. All I asked was a small country branch, with little responsibility.

From time to time I read exciting stories of the Klondike, but I gave them little heed. It was all so remote and inaccessible. None of the romance of the gold rush had been exploited. Yet little did I dream that, while other men were seeking Eldorados, they were also making one for me. Our bank boys had gone in there in "ninety-eight," and we heard of their adventures and the hardships they had endured. It was considered the height of good luck to be sent north, though few profited by it. Indeed, in that supercharged atmosphere of vice and delirium, many went to the devil. It was the romance spot in the bank's history; but of all the officials sent up there, a little junior, humped over a big ledger, was about the only one to win a sizeable stake.

"They're lucky, the guys that go to the Yukon," said the Teller one evening. "They get an outfit allowance of two hundred dollars, out of which they are obliged to buy a coonskin coat. They have a swell voyage. They have a special allowance of fifty dollars a month for grub. They have nice quarters, and even their laundry is paid. Why, a fellow can save every cent of his salary if he feels like it."

"It seems too wonderful to be true," I said. "But I suppose they only take selected men."

"I wish they'd take me," said the Accountant. "But then a man has to be mighty sound to stand that climate. Lucky devils I call them. . . ."

I will never forget the morning the Manager beckoned me into his room. "You are being transferred to White Horse," he said. "You must prepare to go at once. You are very fortunate."

In a daze I went into the outer office. The others were staring at



me. "It's the Yukon," I said. Envy was in their eyes. As for me, I had to take a firm grip on myself, and it was some time before the significance of the change began to sink in. Yet I was sorry to leave that branch. Life there had been delightful. I sold my pony, gave away my banjo, and said farewell to my friends. Arrived at the coast, I received my outfit allowance, bought my coonskin coat for a hundred dollars, and put the rest in my pocket. As I stepped on the boat for Skagway, I had an idea that a new and wonderful chapter in my life was about to begin.

■

BOOK SEVEN

*WHITE HORSE*



## Chapter One

### WHITE HORSE ARRIVAL

“IT’S a tough country,” said the Captain as we sailed up the Inland Passage. “Nothing but the God-damned pines. One gets sick of the sight of them.”

I could not share his lack of enthusiasm. To me the journey north was one of wonder and joy. I wondered at the blue blaze of the glaciers. I wondered at the mountains glooming and gleaming in savage splendour. But most of all I wondered at myself—enjoying so much wonder without it costing me a single cent. It was the first time I had ever made a voyage at the expense of someone else; and, believe me, it tripled the enjoyment. And to think that I was being paid for having a marvellous time! Not only my pleasure was being given me free, but I was being handed two dollars a day for accepting it. To my Scotch mind it didn’t make sense.

So I got to thinking. . . . How gorgeous it would be to live all my life at the expense of others! And so easy, too. I had only to acquire a certain amount of capital, and the interest on it would absolve me from further effort. No doubt it might seem immoral to sit on one’s stern and let the worker contribute to one’s ease. But so many sound citizens did, and no reproach to them. From the receiver of bank interest to the bloated coupon clipper, they were all in the parasite class. They consumed without producing. Like lice they lived on the back of the toiler. But it was the ambition of every toiler to become a parasite in his turn, so it was all right. Society was run that way.

Then an idea came to me. I, too, would become a capitalist and live on unearned increment. Oh, I would be modest in my demands. Did not Thoreau say that one is wealthy according to the number of things one can do without? Give me a dollar a day and I would defy the devil. Five thousand at five per cent would give me twenty dollars a month. I could get by on that, and maybe make more by my pen. There was my Escape Idea cropping up again. And at the back of my mind always the Author Complex. Perhaps I could dodge my destiny by being a pot-bellied banker, and even publish a little book. At my own expense, of course. I might become one of those amateur authors who are such a nuisance. It would salve my

vanity. AN AUTHOR. A poor wretch with dreams, but somehow different from the crowd. All this I thought in the moonlight of mountain magnificence; inspired by sublime scenery to sordid schemes of self-enrichment, because in the end they meant escape to freedom.

Skagway was wreathed in rain when I took the train for White Horse. But immediately the snow began, and soon there were six feet of it on either side of the climbing track. Far below I could see the old trail of ninety-eight, but I did not dramatize it. It looked tough enough, though. I was glad of the comfort of this funny little train, perhaps the most expensive in the world. Had not my ticket, for about a hundred miles of transportation, cost me twenty-five dollars? There were few passengers, and the windows were opaque with ice. I could not see much of the scenery, but what I did glimpse was dreary and depressing. Stunted pines pricked through the snow, and cruel crags reared over black abysmal lakes. A tough country indeed. I was glad I had not been one of those grim stalwarts of the Great Stampede.

At the Yukon frontier I encountered my first Mountie. He failed to make a favourable impression, for he pounced on a package containing a pair of felt boots I had bought in Skagway. He demanded two dollars duty. As I paid I could have kicked myself with them. Two dollars shot to Hades! A nice beginning to my campaign of economic independence.

As I stepped on to the White Horse platform it seemed jammed with coonskin coats. But for the rosy faces of the men inside them, it might have been a coon-carnival. Then one of them addressed me.

"Better put on your coat."

"I'm not cold. How cold is it?"

"About thirty below. You don't feel it because you're a cheechaco. Your blood's like soup. When you've been here a year you'll get cold-conscious. . . . By the way, I'm your Manager. Come along to the house." As he took me to my new home he was no doubt thinking: Another of the duds Head Office dump on us. Well, we must make the best of it.

So there and then I began what was to be one of the happiest periods of my life. For I found a real home such as I had not enjoyed since I left my own. There were four of us, the Manager, his wife, the Teller, and myself, and we surely made things sparkle.

The Manager had the unique distinction of being the world's only sea captain to turn banker. Of an eminent clerical family, but of an adventurous mind, he had defied the family tradition by taking

to the ocean. He might have been a parson; he preferred to be a tar. Then, after roving the Seven Seas, he decided that he and Neptune had just about enough. He would give the land a chance. So he did, but soon he realized that working on a farm was a mug's game. There were easier ways of winning one's meal ticket, and banking might be a good bet.

There are two types of managers, the bureaucratic and the popular. Our skipper was of the latter. He was perhaps the most popular man in town. He was a virtuoso in slang, and his conversation was rich with it. He was a good mixer, oozed geniality, and had great gifts of chaff and humour. His wife was little more than a girl, with a *chic* that was Parisian. Unusually pretty and dainty of figure, in the setting of that rough mining camp, she stood out like a jewel in a junk heap. Yet she looked after us with a maternal solicitude that won our gratitude. She called us her "boys" and we called her "Missis." Few real families of four were more united and happy.

My colleague, the Teller, was a brilliant boy, as surely destined to success as I was to failure. He might have been a millionaire if he had not preferred to nurse the millions of others. As it was, he did pretty well for himself. He was a mass of energy that nothing seemed to exhaust. He had an insatiable appetite for life and a great gift for popularity. He excelled in games, was a hunter, a fisherman, and as keen a swimmer as myself. In all gatherings he was a human dynamo. He neither drank nor smoked and claimed he had never tasted tea or coffee in his life. In fact he was so viceless that he was almost vicious. One day I said to him:

"It's unfair to be so virtuous. It gives you such an edge over the other fellow. A drinking man like myself can't compete with you. Every time I buy a whisky-and-soda, you're that much ahead of me financially. You are exploiting your continence. There is nothing so immoral as morality."

He said: "No doubt you are right. I am cashing in on my exemplary conduct, but I have a good reason. Every day of my life I write a letter to a girl. It is my object to marry that girl, and every dollar I save brings me nearer wedded bliss. To an outsider I may seem a hoarder, but I have a definite aim. I am like granite in my resolve to win to matrimony."

"You mean to win to loss of liberty. Well, I am just as keen to win to freedom. So I am going to match you as a miser. From now on I mean to save every cent I can. So enthusiastic am I in my conception of myself as a future capitalist, I am cutting out the hooch for good." From then on, I put fifty of my sixty dollars a month into a savings account and watched with joy my nest-egg grow. I stinted myself the smallest pleasures. I scrimped, I scraped.

Thrift grows on one. The more I saved the more I wanted to save. And all because of my wish to win to liberty. The bonds of the bank were of velvet, but they chafed all the same. Let me be my own master and take orders from no man. By means of capital let me defy capital and its power to enslave me. And at the back of all this was my desire to achieve authorship.

The Teller was intensely popular, while I was never popular in all my existence. Maybe I shrank from it, maybe I disliked it. Due to my solitary spirit I always wanted to take a back seat. I was as morose as a malamute. But my reticence was partly due to shyness, partly to indifference. I had no disdain for those around me; on the contrary I admired them because they could do so many things I could not. So I enjoyed the popularity of my colleague and trotted meekly at his heels. After all, he was a man of action, I a feckless dreamer.

Yet we were a happy quartette, and I do not recall a sour note to mar our harmony. Meals were occasions of sheer merriment. The Missis would sit in Dresden china daintiness, with a lot of fluffy fal-lals in front, which had a way of getting involved with the sauce. Then the Skipper would shout: "Here, you should have a tin chute hung round your neck, sopping up all the gravy." Then he would make a racy remark, and she would say: "Hubs, if you don't stop your nonsense I'll leave the table." But she would laugh all the while at his drolleries, delivered with never the crack of a smile.

In the Yukon there are practically only two seasons. Spring is negligible; summer comes with a swoop—with midnight melody of birds and myriads of mosquitoes. It was thrilling to see the snow so suddenly vanish, and the brown earth bob up; to watch the ice crack, break and go out in rearing slabs; to behold the eager green springing to the caress of the lingering sun. It was a magic change that happened almost overnight, giving one a sense of unreality.

Then from Outside came the inflowing tide of workers resuming their jobs, and residents returning to their homes. All had enthusiastic tales of their travels, but declared they were glad to be back. The shipwrights returned, the pilots and crews of the boats reappeared; the scene suddenly became a bustling one as every train brought new crowds going into the Interior. Then navigation opened, and the season was in full swing.

During the next five months there was little time to spare from work. We were kept busy at the office, for our town was the gateway to the North. The stream of travel was in full spate, while the local mines were working night and day. In fact, there was little darkness, and we were able to play tennis at midnight. We also paid a daily visit to the swimming hole, a pool formed by the back-up of the

river. On Sundays we never failed to attend church, because the Skipper was a strict sectarian and insisted we decorate the family pew. He was head deacon and used to pass the plate, saying: "Come on, you old stiff, loosen up," or some similar remark. It was of him I thought when in one of my ballads I used the lines:

Me that's a pillar of the church an' takes the rake-off there,  
An' says: "God damn you, dig for the Lord," if the boys don't ante fair.

But the publishers deemed the couplet sacrilegious, and refused to include it in the ballad.

After a time the Skipper said to me: "You have a pious mug. I think you'd make a good deacon." So I became one, and passed the plate in my turn, adjuring the tightwads to come through. I enjoyed that dramatic moment when I held the collection before the Parson, and he gave it his blessing. He himself was a literary man, and when he was not writing sermons he was composing best-sellers. He published a score of novels, many of which were popular. So far as I knew he was the only one in that community who had a taste for letters.

The two handsomest men in the Yukon were friends of mine, and curiously enough, met tragic deaths. One was Superintendent Engineer of the fleet of river steamers—tall, dark and desperately good-looking. He was a bachelor, and many of the women, married and single, angled for him. He did not encourage them; but, like all sailors, he was fond of horses and would occasionally ask one of his female admirers, duly chaperoned, to go for a drive.

On one of those occasions I was walking in the woods, when I met his party returning. They were in great trouble. He had invited two ladies to come for a drive, but on a trail behind the town they had met a pack train. His horses bolted, and he was thrown out and dragged, his leg catching in the wheel. Somehow he had hung on to the lines, and finally pulled the team to a standstill. Now he was in great pain, but tried not to show it. The women were in tears, and I drove the sorry party back to town. He had been injured internally by his fall, and had to go Outside to have an operation. Everything was going on all right. It was a simple matter of straightening out some twisted bowels, and he was duly sewn up again. Then the nurse missed a pair of scissors. To the horror of everyone it was found they had been left in the body. So they had to operate again, but it was too much. The poor chap died, a victim of someone's carelessness.

My second friend was the nephew of an earl and related to half the English nobility. He could have posed for a statue of Adonis, being six feet two of stalwart manhood, with a proud carriage that



made women look at him in admiration. He might have been a cinema star or a lieutenant-commander in the Royal Navy. But when I first knew him he was a deck hand on a river steamboat. Why, I don't know. He was as clean living as he was clean limbed, with a fresh, frank face, and polished manners. Yet there he was, in a blue jersey, working on the deck of a stern-wheeler on the Yukon. If it had been a windjammer on the high seas I could have understood it. There was romance and danger there. But here on the placid river—if he had wanted to shirk the perils of sailing, he could not have found a more secure billet. Yet even the Yukon has its perils. . . .

One peaceful evening the steamer was nosing its way slowly upstream, pushing in front a scow laden with hundreds of small tin barrels. My friend was smoking a cigarette on the forward deck, leaning on the rail and looking dreamily up the river. In the distance a solitary duck was fighting downstream, and soon it would arrive directly overhead. A young cabin boy, slim and blond, ran to get his gun. A well-directed shot would tumble the duck on deck. But in his haste, he tripped, and the gun went off, bang into those tin barrels of . . . *gunpowder*.

There was no explosion, just a great gust of flame that enveloped the steamer. The boy was blown on to the upper deck, a blackened cinder all that was left of him. High in the pilothouse the Captain ran the boat into the bank. The flame-swept decks below were strewn with charred bodies, among them my friend. He died a few hours later. He asked to see me, and his last words were: "God curse the man who invented *gunpowder*."

What an incomprehensible world it seemed! An insignificant shrimp like myself permitted to survive while so many fine fellows were stamped out. More and more I believed in my guardian angel, and the experience of a lifetime has strengthened that belief. I know it is absurd and irrational, but I have steered through so many troubled waters to a serene haven that I cannot help fancying a guiding hand on the rudder.

And what a crazy world! Here was I, a lifelong agnostic, carrying the plate in church. I reconciled it with my convictions, for though I may not believe in religion, I believe in churches. They give me a sense of social stability. And I respect the *spirit* of religion, that reverence for the finer things of life. Churches are a rallying point in the fight for a heaven on earth. Not everyone can stomach my scientific materialism, but I would willingly sacrifice my sense of reason for a return to the faith of my fathers.

So summer passed, the hectic summer of a community trying to cram into four months the work of an entire year. Then the crowds who had flowed in with the spring began to flow out again. It was

a human tide whose final ebbing was one wild welter of escape. The last boats were jammed beyond capacity, and the work was a mad scurry to handle the final exodus. Then the river congealed. The boats docked for the winter; navigation closed. The great river froze solid overnight, the season was at an end, and the real life of the Yukon began.

## Chapter Two

### CONFLAGRATION

WHEN the Gréat Cold came to the Yukon it clamped the land tight as a drum. The transient scurried out, and the residents squatted snugly in. They were the sourdoughs; the land belonged to them; the others were but parasites living on its bounty. That is what we felt as we settled down to the Long Night. It was a comfortable feeling to be shut off from the world with its woes and worries; for we had none of the first and few of the latter. In the High North, winter is long, lonely and cruelly cold, but to the sourdough it is the season best beloved. For then he makes for himself a world of his own, full of happy, helpful people. The Wild brings out virtues we do not find easily in cities—brotherhood, sympathy, high honesty. As if to combat the harshness of Nature, human nature makes an effort to be at its best.

As it was my ambition to be a true sourdough, I welcomed the winter more than most. Its sunny cold exhilarated me. Its below-zero air was as bracing as champagne. Our work in the bank dropped to a quarter of its volume, so that I could take things easy. I joyed to think that for the coming six months I could loaf and dream. For now I realized my dreaming was creative, that from my reveries came thoughts and fancies I might one day put on paper. It was an incubation of all worth while in my life.

I have never been popular. To be popular is to win the applause of people whose esteem is often not worth the winning. I was polite and pleasant, but leaned back socially. I became notorious as a solitary walker, going off by myself as soon as work was done, into the Great White Silence. My lonely walks were my real life; the sheer joy of them thrilled me. I exulted in my love of Nature, and rarely have I been happier.

At four o'clock I would close my ledger for the day. I had a little cocker spaniel who would doze all afternoon by the stove, but from time to time would look inquiringly at the big clock. Then, as surely as four struck, he would run to the closet and fetch my arctics. On my way through town other dogs would join us, till sometimes I had five, leaping and barking joyously around me. Then I would climb the bench above the town and strike through the

woods. There were trails everywhere, and slender pines on which chipmunks barked shrewishly. Sometimes I would shake a tree till I dislodged the little creature. The dogs would wait, full of excitement, and make a dash for it as it fell; but they would never catch it, for which I was devoutly thankful. . . . Oh, those tramps in that world of crystalline purity, when I shared the joy of my canine companions! And my return after three hours of march, so keen set for supper, with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes! Never was life more wonderful.

Then on Sundays, with lunch in my pocket, I would go for the entire day on snowshoes, striking across the river and exploring the snowy waste beyond. I would break trail under the pines, feeling supremely alone in the dazzling solitude, and filled with a rapture I have rarely known. It was then I realized the poetry of my surroundings, but did not yet dream of trying to put it into words. I just felt it with that inarticulate sense people feel in the presence of serene beauty. But I most loved the woods in the silver trance of the moon. Then I would steal away like a wild thing, feeling something akin to ecstasy in that fantasy of light and shade. The moon seemed my friend, calling on me to express the rapture that flooded me.

Of course we had other occupations in the evening, for in winter we sourdoughs organized our lives in friendliness and cheer. In our community rarely a night passed when there was not some social distraction. The skating rink was a scene of gaiety and glamour. We met our girls, and to the music of the orchestra we waltzed on the ice. Or there would be the toboggan slide on the hill. A few swift flights, and the world seemed so bright we wanted to shout and sing. There was something intoxicating in that wonderful air. It made the flame of life burn fiercely and impelled me to creative effort. . . .

But specially in the realm of entertainment did we excel. We had whist drives, which I hated, and dances, which I loved. Also, in the club, we had a handball court, and a big hall we used for indoor baseball. The latter we played with a soft ball that bounced from the walls. It was exciting. We had evening matches which aroused wild enthusiasm. I do not believe as small a community ever packed so much pleasure into its leisure.

Our dances were very proper—not like those of the Settlement, where many of the boys carried hip-flasks. There was enough inebriation in the air without the added stimulus of alcohol. In my three years in White Horse, I don't think I ever tasted a drop of hooch. Drinking means more drinking, and the expense of it just didn't fit in with my economy plan. Then again, the girls at the dances looked

so bright one did not need to be lit up to appreciate them. They danced divinely, for all Yukoners excelled at that art. The men learnt in the dance halls, while the women were naturally on their toes.

Fire was the great fear. We had a well-organized fire brigade. We were drilled and instructed, and when an alarm sounded we were expected to be at our posts. Our equipment consisted of rolls of hose mounted on runners, and a pumping station, where in winter the water was kept hot to prevent it freezing in the pipes. We had over a thousand yards of hose, so that if a fire was anywhere close, we could play two jets on the flames. Turning out at night at fifty degrees below zero was a ghastly business. Often the water froze in the pipes, and they had to be uncoupled. If we got wet we were immediately sheathed in ice, while to touch a bit of metal was agony. Many a frostbite resulted from a careless handling of the hose, yet in our furs and heavy mittens it was difficult to work efficiently. Altogether, getting up at night to a fire was the worst kind of a nightmare; but the occasion was so desperate no one dared to shirk. One morning in early spring we were aroused by the fire siren. It was around three o'clock, and we cursed as we rushed to the scene. It was a grey dawn, evil and askew. Others passed us pulling on their clothes as they ran. I heard them cry: "It's the White Pass Hotel." Already a crowd was gathered near the hotel and, in half-dressed excitement, the guests were gaining the street. Smoke was pouring from the building, but as yet there was no sign of fire.

"Hurry up there with the water," I heard a shout. Then another: "We can't get into the pump house." We had the hose laid, the nozzles pointed, and we waited for the water that would speedily lay the smoke. An easy job. . . . But why did the water not come? Again a shout of fury: "The pump house door is locked. The engineer is not at his post."

"Where the hell is the bastard?"

"Look in Lousetown," said one.

"Or in the poker game at Pete's," said another.

"Maybe the son-of-a-bitch is souped," suggested a third.

All scattered to find him, as in the meantime the smoke increased in volume. Presently I saw a crowd returning with a stupefied little man in their midst. He fumbled with the key of the engine-room, badly rattled and afraid of the furious men who looked as if they wanted to lynch him.

Now all would soon be well. The hotel was only a hundred yards away from the pump house. We could get two streams on the fire and quickly master it. Everything was in place awaiting the water. . . . How long it seemed to be in coming! But the engine had to be started, and the engineer had lost his head. Others were

helping him, probably hindering him. Every second counted as the smoke grew thicker, blacker, deeper. A breathless excitement gripped us. Would the water never come? Hose in hands, with nozzles pointing, we waited, prayed, cursed. . . .

Thank God! At last the pipes swelled and the strong jets shot out. We were saved. We would soon get the fire under control. We inundated the centre of the building where the smoke was thickest. It faltered, almost died away. Soon we would have conquered that interior flame. . . . Now all was over. The smoke had ceased. All we had to do was to ply the hose till the drenched woodwork ceased to smoulder. We prepared to return to our beds. . . .

Suddenly, to our horror, the saving stream ceased. Not a drop of water came forth. At the same time the fire, as if mocking our dismay, burst out again. There was another blanket of black smoke. . . . "Quick! See what's wrong!" shouted the crowd, and a rush was made to the pump-room. Men were yelling frantically for water. Then I could see them dragging out the wretched engineer, who seemed to be in a state of collapse. I heard a shout of panic: "There's no more water in the tanks. He's let them run dry. We're lost. We can't fight the fire."

Despair fell on the milling crowd. Some were cursing, some weeping, some praying. And there they stood staring at those limp hose-pipes from which no water came. We were helpless and, even as we looked, the fire, as if in triumph, shot out a great blaze of flame that dominated the smoke. The holocaust was under way.

It was useless to try to save the hotel. We must rescue all else we could. On the street, right and left, frantic storekeepers were carrying their goods on to the road. On the other side of the street from the hotel was a fine grocery store. The grey-haired proprietor was on the roof, swishing over it buckets of water that were being handed up to him. The street was wide. Surely there was no danger. . . . But even then the water on the roof began to steam, and quite suddenly a tongue of flame licked it hungrily. Scorched horribly, the old man on the roof rolled down and fell into the street. In another moment the structure was ablaze.

The two buildings were now like braziers, and at the station opposite, the employees of the White Pass Railway were trying to save their records. The distance was so great that surely no fire could jump it. Then the station started to blaze; then the freight shed. Then the fire, rejoicing in its strength, leapt across the track and attacked the storehouses. It seemed now as if the whole town was doomed. The buildings next the hotel and grocery were blazing fiercely, and the storekeepers, having carried out all they could, were crying as they watched the rest burn. Further down the street other storekeepers were still trying to salvage their stock. They begged

us to help them, till at last the heat beat them back, and they, too, joined the hopeless, staring line in the middle of the road. I ran along till I came to a grocery store kept by a friend of mine. His daughter, a fragile girl, was shouldering sacks of potatoes and dumping them into the street. Excitement gave her extraordinary strength.

I espied some cans of gasoline in the back of the shop and told her never to mind the potatoes. As the heat grew fiercer we packed out the gasoline. It seemed as if nothing had any weight to me. My strength was tripled and hers doubled at the least. Other merchants were carrying out all they could grab up, using little discrimination. Many seemed to have lost their heads. I saw a dry goods man lugging bolts of cotton, while rolls of silk lay on his shelves. It was one blind frenzy to save all one could in the path of the advancing flame.

Suddenly I heard the Manager calling me: "Come on. The bank's in danger." Even though it was isolated, the fire had raced to the block opposite to us. Panting, we arrived on the scene. Fortunately there were four big barrels of rain water in the yard, and with buckets we drenched the wooden sides of the building. We worked feverishly, but as we swished the water upward, the wood began to smoke. The building across the street burst into flame. Fortunately, it was only a small one, or we would have been lost. For a panic-stricken moment I thought we were doomed. I knew we would have to save the records and let our own property perish. It was touch and go. . . . Then the Skipper, with the agility of an old salt, climbed to a perilous position on the balcony and kept a constant deluge playing on the steaming walls. There were three of us forming a chain to pass buckets up to him. With every ounce of strength we possessed we kept the stream of water going. Even the Missis, still looking decorative, lugged huge buckets on the scene.

At last the building opposite burnt out and we knew we were safe. What a relief! We were exhausted, grimy, parched, but, oh, so happy! Yet our joy seemed unworthy of us, when we looked around and saw bare space and smouldering ruin. Almost the entire town had been wiped out. Ironically enough, the buildings that had been saved were the Customs, the Court House, the Post Office. To these add the bank, and you can understand the bitterness of the townspeople when they commented that those who were spared were those who had least need to be. Well, it was over. What had been a thriving and happy community, a few hours before, was now a charred and smoking eyesore.

The summer that followed was the most hectic I have ever known. We crammed the work of a year into four months. First, an army of carpenters arrived to rebuild the town, and before its cinders

had ceased to smoulder, merchants were again doing business. They put up tents and began selling off their salvaged goods. They must have done pretty well out of the insurance, for their new stores were finer than the old, and their stock richer. Before the spring was well advanced the town was rebuilt better than ever.

Then the stream of travel began. Swiftly it thickened to a flood—first the migrants returning from a winter in the South, then the seasonal workers, then a host of tourists. Soon we were in the spate up to our necks. The office was full nearly all the time, and often we had to work late. Again I managed to play a little tennis along about midnight, and cursed the everlasting song of the birds and the eternal whine of the mosquitoes. Then, with the usual mad rush of escape, the season closed, the snow fell, and the Great Peace began.

It was like gaining the calm of a cove after a stormy sea. Now our Yukon was restored to us. The strangers had departed, and we who remained were like a big family. With a sigh of contented lethargy I settled down to do as little as possible. But there came a change in our merry quartette. The Teller was transferred to Dawson and I took his place. Before he left he and I compared bank accounts. To my great joy I had attained the thousand dollar mark. Of course he had much more, but we congratulated one another. He was nearer his marriage, I my freedom.

Optimistically I reckoned: "It's the first thousand that counts," and I determined to save harder than ever. But, oh, what a long way to go before I could buy my independence! And it was only here in the Yukon I could hope to do so. If I had been Outside it would have taken me five years to save a thousand dollars.

I was succeeded on the ledger by a champion tennis player, a handsome fellow, with a quick Irish wit and a fine singing voice. His gift for popularity made up for my lack. We had a common taste for entertainment, and got up theatricals. I put on *The Area Belle*, with the female parts taken by members of the Mounted Police. And in the months that followed I cultivated my capacity for idleness. I took enough exercise to keep fit, picked melodies on a borrowed banjo, read light fiction. But as I lived a life of complacent happiness I little dreamed that the most wonderful and exciting event of my life was awaiting me just around the corner.

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## Chapter Three

### FIRST BOOK

I RECKON that about my only claim to social consideration at this time was as an entertainer, and a pretty punk one at that. I could sing a song and vamp an accompaniment, but mainly I was a prize specimen of that ingenuous ass, the amateur reciter. The chief items on my repertoire were: *Casey at the Bat*, *Gunga Din* and the *Face on the Bar-room Floor*. They were effective enough, but the moment came when they were staled by repetition, and at that time I was asked to take part in a church concert. What to do?

I was pondering over the problem when I ran into Stroller White, the editor of the *White Horse Star*. The Stroller was a remarkable man, a noted humorist of the North. Occasionally I had sent him bits of verse which he had accepted cordially. Now he addressed me: "I hear you're going to do a piece at the church concert. Why don't you write a pome for it? Give us something about our own bit of earth. We sure would appreciate it. There's a rich paystreak waiting for someone to work. Why don't you go in and stake it?"

I thanked him and said I would think it over. I went for a long walk, and did think, considerably. The idea intrigued me, but I hadn't the foggiest notion how I was going to proceed. All I knew was that I wanted to write a dramatic ballad suitable for recitation. I questioned very much if I would be able, for I started from nothing. I doubt if ever another successful ballad has been produced out of such unbelievable blankness. I said to myself: "First, you have to have a theme. What about revenge? . . . Then you have to have a story to embody your theme. What about the old triangle, the faithless wife, the betrayed husband? Sure-fire stuff. . . . Give it a setting in a Yukon saloon and make the two guys shoot it out. . . . No, that would be too banal. Give a new twist to it. What about introducing music? Tell the story by musical suggestion. That would be different, maybe interesting. . . .

All of which shows my synthetic approach to the job. Yet as I returned from my walk I had nothing doped out. It was a Saturday night, and from the various bars I heard sounds of revelry. The line popped into my mind: "A bunch of the boys were whooping it up," and it stuck there. Good enough for a start.

Arrived home I did not want to disturb the sleeping house; but I was on fire to get started, so I crawled softly down to the dark office. I would work in my teller's cage. But I had not reckoned with the ledger-keeper in the guard-room. He woke from a dream in which he had been playing single-handed against two tennis champions, and licking them. Suddenly he heard a noise near the safe. Burglars! Looking through the trap-door he saw a furtive shadow. He gripped his revolver, and closing his eyes, he pointed it at the skulking shade. . . . Fortunately he was a poor shot or the *Shooting of Dan McGrew* might never have been written. No doubt some people will say: "Unfortunately," and I sympathize with them. Anyhow, with the sensation of a bullet whizzing past my head, and a detonation ringing in my ears, the ballad was achieved.

For it came so easily to me in my excited state that I was amazed at my facility. It was as if someone was whispering in my ear. As I wrote stanza after stanza, the story seemed to evolve itself. It was a marvellous experience. Where I had difficulty in finding a rhyme, I by-passed it, and sometimes when I had my rhyme pat I left the filling out of the line for future consideration. In any case, before I crawled to bed at five in the morning, my ballad was in the bag.

So that's the story behind "McGrew." The speaker, through his own emotions, tells the story of the Stranger whose matrimonial experience presumably resembled his own. It suggests the power of music to stir the subconscious and awaken dormant passions; but at the time I wrote it I don't think any such idea was in my mind. All I thought of was to make a dramatic monologue, which, owing to the cuss-words, I could not recite at the church concert after all.

I put the Lady Lou away in a drawer and forgot about her. Having cost me so little effort, I did not think the work could have any value. How my old professor of literature would have snorted with disgust over it! Probably it handicaps a writer to be a scholar and a gentleman. I could crook my little finger over a tea-cup, and prattle about Pater, but what did it avail me? Better the college of crude reality and the culture of the common lot.

I did not write anything more for a month, and my second ballad was the result of an accident. One evening I was at a loose end, so thought I would call on a girl friend. When I arrived at the house I found a party in progress. I would have backed out, but was pressed to join the festive band. As an uninvited guest I consented to nibble a nut. Peeved at my position, I was staring gloomily at a fat fellow across the table. He was a big mining man from Dawson, and he scarcely acknowledged his introduction to a little bank clerk. Portly and important, he was smoking a big cigar with a gilt band.

Suddenly he said: "I'll tell you a story Jack-London never got." Then he spun a yarn of a man who cremated his pal. It had a surprise climax which occasioned much laughter. I did not join, for I had a feeling that here was a decisive moment of destiny. I still remember how a great excitement usurped me. Here was a perfect ballad subject. The fat man who ignored me went his way to bankruptcy, but he had pointed me the road to fortune.

A prey to feverish impatience, I excused myself and took my leave. It was one of those nights of brilliant moonlight that almost goad me to madness. I took the woodland trail, my mind seething with excitement and a strange ecstasy. As I started in: *There are strange things done in the midnight sun*, verse after verse developed with scarce a check. As I clinched my rhymes I tucked the finished stanza away in my head and tackled the next. For six hours I tramped those silver glades, and when I rolled happily into bed, my ballad was cinched. Next day, with scarcely any effort of memory I put it on paper. Word and rhyme came eagerly to heel. My moonlight improvisation was secure and, though I did not know it, "McGee" was to be the keystone of my success.

I carelessly put my second ballad with my first and went my unsuspecting way. I did my duties cheerfully, thankful for my well-being and glorying in the open air. On my long tramps in the woods I carried a book of poetry, usually Kipling, and would rant poetic stanzas to chipmunks and porcupines.

One early spring I stood on the heights of Miles Canyon, with all about me a magnificent panorama. I breathed deeply, taking the beauty of it right into me. Then suddenly the line popped into my head: *I have gazed on naked grandeur where there's nothing else to gaze on*. My mentor seemed to be at my ear again, prompting, whispering, and I went right on. Maybe the two-syllabled rhyme helped me, for rhyme has always been a lure and a challenge. So again I hammered out a complete poem in the course of my walk. I entitled it *The Call of the Wild*. Its inspiration was the spring in my blood, and the wild scenery above the White Horse Rapids.

But my spate of inspiration was just beginning. In the two months that followed, I wrote something every day, and always on my lonely walks on the trails. I looked forward to them because I knew the Voice would whisper in my ear, and that I would just as surely express my feelings. It was the outlet of the exultant joy that glowed in me. I was so brilliantly happy. Sometimes I thought I would burst with sheer delight. Words and rhymes came to me without any effort. I bubbled verse like an artesian well. I wrote the *Spell of the Yukon*, *The Law of the Yukon* and many others, a solitary pedestrian pounding out his rhymes from the intense gusto of living.

And as I finished each poem I filed it away with the others and forgot it. It never occurred to me to set any value on my work. It was just a diversion, maybe a foolish one. The impulse to express my rapture in a world of beauty and grandeur was stronger than myself, and I did it with no thought of publication.

But nature was not enough. I wrote of human nature, of the life of a mining camp, of the rough miners and the dance-hall girls. Vice seemed to me a more vital subject for poetry than virtue, more colourful, more dramatic, so I specialized in the Red Light atmosphere. And every day my pile of manuscripts grew higher, and I piled my shirts on them and forgot them. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the flow of inspiration ceased. My bits of verse lay where I left them, neglected and forgotten for more than a year.

It was ever thus with me—bursts of creative energy, then lapses into lethargy. . Apathy gripped me, so that I loathed the work I had done. A new enthusiasm would seize me and I would drive in another direction. I was temperamental, unpredictable. It might be months before I put pen to paper again; and in the meantime, in a slovenly roll held by an elastic band, my sheaf of verse lay at the bottom of a bureau drawer. . . .

One day I was cleaning out my bureau when I came on that miserable manuscript. I looked at it bitterly. How much time had I wasted in idle scribbling! What folly and frustration! Then a fantastic, an incredible idea came to me. Reading it over I thought some of the stuff wasn't half bad. So I gave it to the Missis to glance at—very humbly and apologetically.

"Some of it's not so dusty," she opined. "Why not make a little book out of it, and give it to your friends for Christmas? It would be such a nice souvenir of the Yukon. Of course you would have to leave out such rough things as that McGrew poem. Also the McGee one, and a lot of things like *The Harpy* and *My Madonna*. They're a bit too frank."

I quite agreed, though at the last moment a sudden impulse made me shove them in with the others. Then Fate took a hand. I had just received a hundred-dollar bonus for Christmas, so I decided that, instead of sending it to swell my savings, I would squander it in egregious authorship. I would herd my flock into a snug fold. I visioned a tiny volume of verse which I would present to pals, who would receive it with that embarrassment with which one accepts books from amateur authors. I would get a hundred copies printed, and maybe during my lifetime I could bestow them, with apologetic wistfulness, on my kindly acquaintances.

"Here is my final gesture of literary impotence," I said. "It is my farewell to literature, a monument on the grave of my misguided

Muse. Now I am finished with poetic folly for good. I will study finance and become a stuffy little banker."

But before I staked my hundred dollars, my Scotch mind suggested that I might find some sucker to share my risk. So I went to the village Shylock, a fellow Scot, from whom I occasionally borrowed a ten spot at an interest rate of ten per cent. a month.

"I've written a book," I said. "I'm having it published. Do you want to buy a half-interest? It will cost you fifty dollars."

"Whit's yer book about?"

"Oh, just poetry."

"Poetry!" He almost leapt into the air. "D'ye take me for daft? Who buys poetry in this blasted burg? Not a damned soul. Look at all them padded poets I've had on my shelf for years. I never read a line of the stuff myself, but I'm well stuck with them padded poets. Now if it was stories like that Rex Beach writes, well, I might consider it. But poetry, laddie, oh, no. . . ."

He was so rude I went away like a whipped dog. Yet years after, when he realized that his fifty dollars would have brought him in about fifty thousand, I think it broke his heart. I know it would have broken mine if I had been obliged to give him half the dough that book brought me in royalties.

Well, that was that. So I arranged my pieces, retyped them and sent them, care of Papa, to a firm of publishers who did amateur work. I remember so well the morning I posted that envelope. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," I thought, as I dropped it in the letter box, and instantly regretted my act. I did not register the envelope, I felt so careless and indifferent, and told myself: "Silly ass! Why didn't you burn the stuff?" I ordered a hundred copies, or as many as my cheque would cover. How people would laugh when the book came out! It would be the joke of the town. I would be regarded as one of those half-baked drivellers who dream instead of doing honest-to-God work.

Well, let them jeer. I would slink away and lick my wounds in secret. With my sensitive, self-torturing nature, I would mock my own misery. I would laugh with them at my cheap vanity. Never again would I make that kind of a fool of myself . . . never again.

## Chapter Four

## SUCCESS

ONE day I had a letter from the publisher. It was quite a long letter, and it returned my cheque.

"There," I thought. "They don't want to publish my book. Too coarse, no doubt. They are sending me back my money." I was busy on the cash at the moment, and had no time to read the letter, but my feelings were of relief tinged with chagrin. I had been about to make a fool of myself. Well, I would burn the darned stuff. So much the better.

When I was free I took up the letter. What was this? With a growing sense of stupefaction, I read. With a sense of unbelief, I re-read. The words danced before my eyes. But it was a dance of joy. And at the same moment my whole being seemed lit up with rapture. For the letter told quite a story. It seemed that when they sent the manuscript to their composing-room, the foreman noticed how quickly the type-setting had been completed. "The fastest job ever done in the office," he said. He smelled a rat, as it were. Taking the galley proofs to the office, he had shown them around. One of the travellers had scanned them carelessly, then become suddenly enthusiastic. He was an amateur reciter, and it was the McGee ballad that attracted him. He said: "Here, let me see. . . . This looks like the real thing." He had declaimed it to the staff with great effect. Then he cried: "Say, just lemme have those proofs. Maybe I can *sell* this stuff."

He did. He went around the trade reciting McGee, and booking orders so fast it made his head swim. He dropped everything else to push the book. . . . This was the story the publishers told me at some length in their letter. They told it with jubilation in the telling. Then they added that they had sold seventeen hundred copies from the galley proofs alone, and only in their city. Would I allow them to be my publishers, and they would pay me a ten per cent. royalty on a dollar book?

Would I? WOULD I? I telegraphed acceptance so quick I did not give them a chance to change their minds. Then I went for a long walk, reading over and over my wonderful letter. My dreams were coming true. I would be an author, and not an amateur one. Already

I had made a hundred and seventy dollars. A gold mine! But I did not think of the money. It was the glory of achieving something, I, who thought I was a dud. I was living in an enchanted world. It seemed as if the woods, the birds, the sky shared my joy. I sang and leaped like a wild thing. . . .

Then, having exhausted my energy, I sobered down and began to take a calmer view of the situation. I mustn't indulge in foolish hopes. No, I would have a modest success, a bit of money, a little publicity. Well, better that than the kicks in the rear that had hitherto been my portion. But let me quote, as nearly as I can remember, the words of a well-known broadcaster.

"In the composing-room the men who set up the words got so enthusiastic they went about reciting them like crazy schoolboys. They took the sheets home, spouted them to their spouses, and shouted them to the neighbours over the garden fence. On trains going west salesmen read them from the galley proofs to receptive roughnecks; while in the bars of the prairie towns drummers declaimed them to the boys in the back room. Rarely has there been such a riot over the printing of a book. And to the amazement of the publishers, before it came out many thousands of copies were sold."

All this I did not even suspect. I went about my work, strummed my banjo, walked the woods and carried on in my humble way. But in the back of my mind was the sweetness of achievement.

I told no one but the Missis of what I had done, till suddenly the first spring mail brought me a package containing copies of my brain baby. I gave them away apologetically, and they were received with embarrassment. People in that town hardly ever read verse, and now I was putting them in a spot. They would be forced to scan my book, to pay me the compliments politeness demanded. That was taking a mean advantage of friendship. I almost felt like begging their pardon for bothering them with my egregious effort.

Yet strange to say, even the least literary of my friends seemed to find something extenuating in it, while a few were quite enthusiastic. People whom I had never suspected of poetic leanings impulsively shook my hand. A lawyer we called the Judge, who up to now had never noticed me, said with feeling: "My boy, I've read your book. It's out of sight. I mean it—out of sight." Coming from an old whiskey soak I appreciated the compliment.

My own feelings, when I caressed this bratling of my muse, were, I suppose, like the rapture of a mother over her first-born. I gazed

with awe and emotion at a slim, drab, insignificant volume. Yet it was a part of me, compounded of my ecstasy and anguish. I would rot in my shroud, but it would remain a testimony to my brief breath of being. Already it was being sold in the shops of the town. My Shylock had taken twenty copies on the understanding that I would take them off his hands if he got stuck with them. But soon he came to me, looking bewildered.

"Say, laddie, I've sold out all them books I ordered. Could ye jist let me have a dizzen of yours at the trade price?" So I let him have them out of the two dozen I had ordered for myself, and he went off happy. But in three days he was back again to say he was sold out and had telegraphed to the publisher for half a hundred by the first mail.

It indeed surprised me that people were actually *buying* my book, and I felt a little guilty about it. It did not seem to me worth a dollar. It was a shame to take the money. At the foot of each title page was printed: *AUTHOR'S EDITION*. I realized these must have belonged to the original hundred I had ordered at my own expense. I believe that to-day there are only two copies of this edition in existence, and recently one was sold to a Californian collector for a hundred dollars.

It is interesting to record the reaction of the citizens to my book. Many thought me a presumptuous young pup, trying to exploit the town to my profit. To some I was a freak, to others a fourflusher. A few liked it and complimented me mildly, half afraid to show too much appreciation. No one saw in it a record-breaking success.

My chief antagonism came from the church. The first to express disapproval was the chief deacon. One morning he came to the bank where I was counting cash. His voice was dry, his manner sour. He said: "My wife's been reading your book, and she and the ladies of the sewing-circle think that it is a pity you should have written so much about the bad women of the town and said nothing about the good ones."

"Well," I said, scratching my head, "we take the good ones for granted. But you see, it's story-stuff I'm after, and vice has more colour than virtue. I write to please the public, and, though I have nothing against virtue, I've frequently remarked that a lot of people look on it as rather a bore."

He gaped with horror and answered me eloquently with silence. There, I thought, is another enemy. I imagine he wanted me to resign from the church, but I clung to my collection plate like a drowning sailor to a life-buoy. It seemed my sole hold on respectability.

Then, with the opening of the season, public opinion began to



change. Citizens returned from the Outside with the news that my book was a good seller. It was in all the book-stores and people were talking about it. It was said I was making real money, yes, hundreds of dollars, out of it. And to most, money was the standard of success. If a book sold well, why, it must be good. If a man made money, well, he must be smart.

So they began to look at me with consideration. And when the tourists came in, their respect increased. For every tourist had a copy of the book and quoted it with enthusiasm. They crowded to the bank, pushing it through my wicket with requests for autographs. The other members of the staff sicked them on to me, deriving a sardonic glee from my embarrassment.

Pretty soon it seemed as if I was one of the attractions of the town, perhaps the main one. Blushingly I sought to evade the demonstrations of spectacled female admirers, and fled to the forest glades. But in my teller's cage I was a mark for them, and they spouted my stuff at me *ad nauseam*. Some of them even suggested I was a celebrity, and I had only to go outside to realize my vogue.

So ended another season. It had been very exhilarating. Then the snows came, sparkling zero weather and the Yukon we all loved. But I was not to enjoy another winter there. I was told I was due for a three months' leave, and was forced to take a long holiday *with* pay. I bade good-bye to White Horse with great regret. It was a brave little burg, birthplace of my prosperity. I had been brilliantly happy there. Every day had been enjoyable. To-day they tell me it is populously important and flourishing. I have never revisited it, but I cherish the three years I spent there as one of my fondest memories.

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BOOK EIGHT  
*THE GOLD-BORN CITY*



## Chapter One

### DAWSON ARRIVAL

I WAS not feeling very gay about my coming holiday. I did not want to leave the Yukon. Fancy being peeved because one had to take a three months' vacation with full pay! But it was like that. My savings account had been fattening for three years, and now I could no longer feed it. I would have to buy my own meal-ticket and spend my salary in holiday expenses. Perhaps more than my salary. Well, I had that royalty money to help me out.

I landed from the steamer in fog and rain, a sample of the weather most of my stay on the coast. I lived in a boarding-house with twenty boarders and one bath. Contrary to my expectation, I found my book was little known, and I was a small frog in a big puddle. I walked around the park in cheerless drizzles and revisited the scenes of my former hardships. I tried to imagine I was again broke and friendless, hugging myself when I realized I was neither. In the raw, damp weather I caught colds, from which in the Yukon I was immune. The climate here was indeed detestable, and I hated my enforced holiday. Then there was the chance I might not be sent back to the North. That would be a catastrophe. I realized how much I loved the Yukon, and how something in my nature linked me to it. I would be heart-broken if I could not return. Besides, I wanted to write more about it, to interpret it. I felt I had another book in me, and would be desperate if I did not get a chance to do it.

So my hapless holiday passed, and the day came when I must report to the Inspector. He was the same gruff character. He made no reference to my literary effort, but then none of the bank officials did. I think they resented my trespass into the Land of Letters, for they ignored my book. If they had known it would ultimately sell a million copies, maybe they would have been more cordial. I don't know, though. Officials must be stand-offish with their underlings. I have always hated authority and loathed discipline, so the pomposity of the man behind the desk arouses my spleen.

But I do not like to think this of the Inspector who played such a vital rôle in my life. I like to think that he had read my book, and that he wanted to give me a chance to write another. Perhaps under his frosty exterior beat a sympathetic heart that was willing to give a

puling poet a break. Yes, I believe that; for with a twinkle in his eye he said: "Well, you'll be sorry to hear you're going back to the North. I have decided to send you to Dawson as teller."

At these words joy possessed me. I think he saw it, for he thawed a bit and wished me quite a genial good-bye. No shaking hands, of course. No personal feeling could enter into his relation with those under him. He was making moves on a giant chess-board, in which human interest was barred. . . . How it must be fun to play God!

I never saw him again; but I will always consider him the benevolent arbiter of my destiny, even if unwittingly so. For there is no doubt it was that last move on the board that assured my fortune. So, as he lies in an honoured grave, let a humble pawn lay a wreath of gratitude to his memory.

As I went north again my mood was of serene happiness and of faith in the future. After its first spurt my book was not so hot. But I believed it would be a steady seller. Well, I felt sure there was a lot of copy up there waiting for me to grab it. I was keen to get on the job. I wanted to write the story of the Yukon from the inside, and the essential story of the Yukon was that of the Klondike. In prose or in verse no one had done it. Perhaps I would be the one to work out that vein of rich ore. Maybe I would be the Bret Harte of the Northland.

So, nursing my conceit, I journeyed north again. Oh, but it was good to get away from the muggy coast, and to greet the great silence of the snows! Even the loneliness was friendly, for it was in harmony with my spirit. Here was my land, the grandest on earth, and it was welcoming me home. I would be its interpreter because I was one with it. And this feeling has never left me. The Yukon was the source of my first real inspiration. Of all my life, the eight years I spent there are the ones I would most like to live over.

From White Horse to Dawson was six days by open sleigh. It was then I realized the vastness of the land and its unconquerable reservation. The temperature was about thirty below zero. With bells jingling, we swept through a fairyland of crystalline loveliness, each pine bough freighted with lace and gems, and a stillness that made silence seem like sound. Day after day, serene and sunny solitude, as we hunched in our coon coats, half doped by the monotony of bitter brightness.

Our breath froze on our fur collars; our lashes and eyebrows were hoar; our cheeks pinky bright, as we took shallow breaths of the Arctic air. Every now and then the driver would have to break icicles out of the nostrils of his horses. Sometimes the sleigh would upset, and often we would have to get out and push through waist-

high snowdrifts. Twice a day we stopped at roadhouses to change horses. There we would find a meal prepared and be obliged to eat. As we had no exercise, we suffered from surfeited stomachs and had to take laxatives. Meals and beds cost two dollars each. When we woke up in the morning we would say: "Six o'clock, six dollars."

It was dark when we got to Dawson. A gloomy lad, who looked like Abe Lincoln, met me at the stage. "I am a reception committee of one," he said gravely, "come to direct you to the bank mess and also to warn you."

"About what?" I said, alarmed.

"Well, your reputation has gone ahead for bawdiness and booze. Mind you, for myself I kinda sympathize with you, but the other boys are on the pious side. You must never let them hear bad language such as you use in your book. And they would be so horrified if you referred to the Tenderloin. We have meetings and sing hymns every evening. No doubt you will join us in prayer."

"It's O.K. with me," I said, willing to be agreeable. "But say, how long have *you* been here?"

"Since ninety-nine. I came the hard way. Started from Edmonton. It took me two years." I marvelled. I had come the easy way—by Pullman. It had taken me two weeks. Incidentally, to-day it can be done in two days. However, I looked at him with reverence. Two years on the trail! . . .

"I'm a gold-buyer at the bank," he went on. "You can't fool me on dust and nuggets. Gold Run, Sulphur, Hunker, Dominion—I can tell them at a glance. I do nothing all day but buy gold dust."

My reverence swelled to the point of worship. Here was a real old-timer, a sourdough of sourdoughs. I walked with him along a street that bordered the frozen Yukon. Lights were dim in cabins, and shadows shuffled past. My felt shoes squeaked in the dry snow. Like a frozen prairie lay the river, menacingly mysterious. We walked the dim street till we came to a low dark building.

"The bank mess. It used to be the bank. First a tent, then this. Ah, if these log walls could talk! You know, there's enough gold dust under the floor boards to make a fortune. They used to sling it around pretty reckless in the old days."

From the interior came sounds of rejoicing, and as he pushed open the double door there was a blaze of light and a burst of cheer. In a long, low room a dozen fellows were variously engaged. Some were standing up to a small bar, some playing cards. One was strumming on a piano. As I entered he cried: "Here comes the bloody Bard." Then there was a shout: "Hail to the lousy Bard." "The Bard of Bawdyville," announced the pianist, "come to poison our innocent minds with his vicious verse."

Hail poet, known as Ruddy Kip,  
Who paints for us the Yukon chip:  
Underneath a lamp of red  
Sighing softly: 'Come to bed.' "

"You've got me wrong, fellows," I protested. But I was shouted down, and a glass of whisky was pressed into my hand. Feeling like a lamb in a den of wolves, I drank the fiery stuff. The room reeled round and, exhausted, I sank into a big arm-chair. A Jap cook, entering from the kitchen to announce dinner, saved me from utter collapse.

The meal that followed was well cooked and copious. At the head of the table sat the Accountant, a youth with a high-pitched voice and spectacles. Supposed to be responsible for the decorum of the board, he took a book from his pocket and read with concentration all through the meal. I was just able to see that it was *Moby Dick*, for I was getting into a state where seeing is in duplicate. Before each of us was a bottle of beer. Next me was a lad with a cherubic face; he was so blond his head looked like a peeled turnip.

"Drink your beer," he told me. "We're supposed to finish our bottles. You see, we have the brewery account, and have to live up to it. It's good beer, though. No hardship to get it down."

We had soup, roast beef, apple dumpling, and the tone of the table was ribald. In fact, its revelry was Rabelaisian; but in its midst the spectacled youth read on imperturbably.

"You must excuse him," said my neighbour. "He's absent-minded. You see, he was born at sea, and he's been at sea ever since."

As we reached the dessert, men in uniform dropped in. "From the Mounted Police," said the baby-faced youth. "The barracks are next door."

Each visitor was hailed with yells of welcome and often a burst of song. Here was one greeting sung to the tune of *John Brown's Body*. Suppose the entrant was Major Jenkins, they sang:

Poor old Jenkins has a boil upon his . . . um;  
Poor old Jenkins has a boil upon his . . . um;  
Poor old Jenkins has a boil upon his . . . um;  
And it hurts like heck when he sits.

It was not sung exactly like that. Certain words were vulgarized in a way the censor will not allow me to print; but the new-comers laughed, took out their pipes, and helped themselves to a drink at the bar. In the meantime the boys at the table finished their beer, and the hilarity rose to a climax. And in the midst of this maelstrom of mirth an old man entered.

"Hooray! Here's Sandy with the mail," they shouted. Then up-

rose the chant: "Poor old Sandy" . . . etc. Sandy was the bank messenger, very Scotch and morally austere. His weakness was for whisky, and once in a while he would go on a bat that lasted for days. But he was so sober between whiles the bank winked at his lapses from grace. He had saved tenaciously, till now he was reputed almost wealthy.

He handed to each member of the staff the mail that had come in by stage; but at the last he held a letter in his hand, peering at it through his spectacles. "I'm thinkin' it's for the new clerk," he said, handing it to me.

"From my publisher," I guessed, for an alcoholic blur was over my vision. Then a cheque fluttered down. Taking it up, I saw a number one and some zeros. "Looks like ten dollars," I said, and I asked my neighbour to confirm my guess. But his eyes were even more muzzy than my own.

"Looks like a hundred to me," he hazarded. "Here, Sandy, you're the only sober man in the crowd—what's this cheque the bloody poet's been getting?"

Sandy peered at it. His face assumed a look of awe. "My gosh, mon," he said, "yon cheque's for a *thoosand dollars*." It was, too. And the letter read: Account of Royalties. I was too dazed to realize it, as the cheque was passed from hand to hand. Some suggested it was a fake and advised me to use it for toilet paper; but old Sandy put out a restraining hand, and reverently returned it to me. "Pit it safely in yer pooch, laddie. It'll come handy one o' thae days." Respect was written on his face. If the others were impressed they concealed it carefully. "Here's a guy just made a grand," one shouted. "The occasion calls for a bottle of hooch—nay, two bottles. Hey, brother, what about it?"

"Three bottles," I said.

"That'll set you back ten bucks, sweetheart."

"Okay," I said; so they produced three bottles of Black and White, and glasses were filled. Then more of the Mounted Police boys, scenting booze from afar, trickled in, and soon there was quite a crowd. In its midst I sat bemused and a little incoherent, when the Accountant grabbed me by the arm.

"Come and I'll show you your quarters," he said; and steered me upstairs to a warm, friendly room, with a bed I loved at first sight. "A bunch of the boys are whooping it up all right," he laughed. "I thought I'd better rescue you before things got too hot. They're good chaps but a bit boisterous. And you must be all in after your day on the trail. Better get some sleep. By the way, I've a lot of books I can lend you any time you feel like it. I'm the only one here that reads to any extent. No one else reads poetry. I think Kipling's great, but I've just got a book called *A Shropshire Lad*



that's the goods. I'll pass it on to you. . . . Well, good-night. Better lock your door." Later, I was sorry I had not taken his advice, for I was aroused from a sound sleep by someone shaking me. Four dim figures were in my room, and from below came sounds of revelry.

"Two ladies wanna meet poet. Lovely ladies. Come on, pal. Mustn't disappoint nice girls."

I protested drowsily. "Let me get some clothes on and I'll be right down."

"No, no. Clothes not necessary. Come on down as you are."

I was horror-stricken, when suddenly I felt myself seized and pinioned. Then I realized how helpless a man is with four others hanging on to his limbs. Though I fought frantically, I might have been a baby in their hands. Shrieking with laughter, they carried me down to the crowded mess room. The whisky was still holding out. A poker party was in progress, and two girls sat at the piano.

And right in the middle of the floor I was dumped down. Fortunately, I had on my pyjamas, but unluckily they were the pair I had worn on my trip. They were badly creased and not too clean. As I rose from the floor I felt a sorry sight. Standing there I tried to smooth down my garments, hoping there were no gaping apertures, as I was introduced to the girls. Then I grabbed a sofa blanket and draped myself in it. After which I was given a whisky, and it all began over again. In the end I was induced to sit at the piano and sing some of my songs, and not the most respectable at that. It was in the wee small hours when I was able to sneak off to bed, yet still the boys were whooping it up.

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## Chapter Two

### SECOND BOOK

NEXT morning I was aroused by the Accountant. Grinning cheerfully, he asked me how I was feeling.

"Pretty rotten. I've a helluva hang-over."

"Some strong coffee will buck you up. Remember you have to interview the Manager."

The latter was in his office reading his morning mail. In a crisp voice he bade me be seated. I was feeling a bit disgruntled; but I had in my pocket a cheque for a thousand dollars, so I lacked some of my usual humility. I thought: It's the old trick, keeping me waiting to impress me with his importance. He's saying to himself: "Here's a guy that's published a book and thinks he's Somebody. But we'll soon show him that, as far as the bank goes, he's just a piddling little nobody."

I quite appreciated his attitude. He was about my own age, but he had more banking in his little finger than I had in my whole carcass. As usual, I was in a false position. I had been in one all my life, and I was getting a bit sick of it. But I had to take things as they were. Only I was minded to have done with false positions. Up to now I had been an escapist; now I realized I was a rebel as well. And then I knew the reason—that thousand-dollar cheque.

And here let me interpolate a note of petulance. I have always resented stuffed-shirtism. Why should a man who drinks with you at a bar assume an attitude of dignity behind his roll-top desk? Dignity is the camouflage of charlatans. What man is dignified with his pants down, or in the act of perpetuating his species? Dignified men are hypocrites and frauds. No man who has the honesty to see himself as he really is can be anything but humble. Only fools can take themselves seriously. . . . With these thoughts passing through my mind I sat waiting to be addressed. I was a poor little piker who must be kept in his place. Well, it would be all right. I would be humble yet awhile, but the time would come when I would reverse all that. The Manager addressed me sharply by my surname, and I sirred him respectfully, and he gave me my orders. And all the time I was saying: "Oh, hell! How long, how long?"

But that day as I was balancing my cash he came to me examin-

ing my cheque, and scratching his head. "All this money," he said. "What does it represent?"

"Verse," I said. "Just verse."

He looked bewildered. "It's a strange world." He sighed and scratched his head; and I agreed it was indeed a strange world.

The more easy money one gets the more one wants—up to a certain point. With me it was the five-thousand-dollar mark. To attain that I was willing to deny myself the pleasures others enjoyed. I cultivated thrift to the point of frugality. I gloated over my growing bank balance; but it was not love of money that made me save so eagerly; it was the hope of freedom. If I achieved the reputation of a tight-wad, it was put down to my Scotch nationality. To some extent maybe it was. Yet a Scot is always ready to buy a drink, and I shunned even that. On Sunday I allowed myself a cigar after dinner, and lit it on the way to church. But when I arrived at the door, it would be only half smoked, so I would stick it in the snow and retrieve it when I came out. The others chaffed me about this, but at the time it seemed to me a natural thing to do.

One day the Manager came to me with my laundry bill. He said: "You know, I suppose, that the bank pays for your laundry. If your bill was too high we might complain, but yours is surprisingly low. I have here accounts for other members of the staff amounting to six and seven dollars each. Yours amounts to a dollar thirty-five cents. Do you realize that your washing is not costing you anything?"

Grinning, I answered in my broadest Scotch: "Ay, sir; I ken the laundering's free, but *the rubbing's awful harrd on the shirts*." And being quite a charming chap he went away laughing.

I imagine economy is a virtue only when it is a necessity. I practised penury so many years that it almost became a habit. When prosperity came it was hard to break myself of cheese-paring. The carefulness imposed on me by years of grinding poverty had entered into my system, and I was incapable of lavishness. Even to-day I am happier in modest comfort than in the lap of luxury, and the bravery of extravagance gives me a feeling of guilt.

But my lucre-grabbing period, however unworthy, was limited to the time it took me to gain the sum that was to assure me social security. After that I lost all interest in money, and cultivated a comfortable ignorance of my financial standing. All I knew was that it was improving all the time; but never again did I watch that mounting total in my bank book and gloat over it, as I did in those days of struggle to escape the curse of poverty.

My success in saving was stimulated by the ease of my efforts. Royalties were now coming in from the States, and for some time I

had been getting cheques of twenty-five dollars a month. Suddenly they jumped to fifty, then a hundred, then a hundred and fifty. There they seemed to be stabilized. From all sources it looked as if I were making four thousand a year from my literary work, while the bank was paying me nine hundred. I gave myself furiously to thinking. . . .

As a teller I was not a success and far from happy. I, who hated responsibility, was accountable for big sums of money every day. I worried over all that currency in my care. My fear of making a mistake made me over-cautious, so that I was slow in paying out. At the close of the day my nervousness in balancing my cash amounted to fear. I seldom got a first-shot balance and generally had to hunt for a shortage. This meant a feverish amount of anxiety till I found my error, and left me with a headache that lasted till dinner-time. In my painstaking way I was a poor man to be on the cash.

Another reason was that I failed to ingratiate myself with the customers. A teller's greatest asset is his affability. A customer likes to be greeted with a gay word, a humorous sally. I never had the gift of facile chaff. In my strict attention to business I was grim and monosyllabic. Still, in my four years as a teller I handled millions of dollars, and I never lost a cent. In fact with my small "overs" I kept myself in tobacco money.

To succeed in a bank one must have its interest at heart. As time went on I found that my chief aim was to draw my salary and to do as little as possible for it. And this growing dislike for my job increased my determination to be done with it for good. If I could only be sure that my present income from writing would keep up? . . . Then it was borne on me that I must follow up my success with a second book. There was no opportunity to write during the rush and scurry of the summer. After a hard day on the cash I was too tired in the evening to do anything but rest. However, I could at least assemble the material against the time when I would have the vitality to use it. And this I proceeded to do.

After my years in White Horse it was not hard for me to adjust myself to the new setting. Dawson was five times bigger, but its character of a small town was the same. From a one-time population of forty thousand, it had dropped to four, and was on the way to become a ghost. Buildings were being deserted and left to ruin. Less than a third of the dwellings were occupied.

Of course, the old landmarks remained, and even a dance-hall was running when I first arrived. But this was speedily closed down. For the community was now influenced by the churches and the lodges. The townsfolk were great joiners, and nearly everyone be-

longed to secret societies. I was a Wow-Wow and an Arctic Brother, though I never went very far with either. Brotherhood was not much in my line. I suspected that many members joined out of self-interest; but I have never been a climber and I disapprove of social discrimination.

Among my Arctic Brothers, however, I met many who had come in over the trail of ninety-eight. I wormed their stories out of them and tucked away many a colourful yarn. They were glad to find an eager listener, so I goaded their memories till they felt they were collaborating with me. I was like a reporter, ferreting out details of a story that would be a scoop. My only wonder was that no other writer had grabbed the rich stuff waiting to be won.

At midnight I wandered the streets of the abandoned town, with the light still strong enough to read by. I tried to summon up the ghosts of the argonauts. The log cabins, in their desolation, were pathetic reminders of a populous past. I loved the midnight melancholy of the haunted streets, with the misguided birds singing, and the neglected flowers springing. As I pensively roamed these empty ways, a solitary and dreamful mourner, ghosts were all about me, whispering and pleading in the mystic twilight. Thus I absorbed an atmosphere that eluded all others; thus I garnered material for another book. Oh, my Dawson of those days was a rich soil from which I reaped a plentiful harvest!

The writing of my second book might be considered a *tour de force*. I had my material in the bag, and I did the book in four months, working from midnight till three in the morning. Any other hours were impossible because of the rumpus about me. The boys were forever whooping it up, and the only quiet I could get was in the small hours. So I would go to bed at nine and sleep till twelve. Then I would make myself a pot of black tea and begin to write. When I went to bed for good, I would be so imaginatively excited I could not sleep, and would rise for breakfast feeling as if I were suffering from a hang-over. It was tough going, but I kept doggedly at it.

In writing this book I had to *think* more than I usually do. I don't like to have to think as I write. I prefer to sit down, and hope for the stuff to come, and if I wish hard enough it generally does come. If it doesn't, I say: "Oh, to hell with it," and wait for the proper mood. But this time I really had to get down and dig. Instead of my usual joyous exuberance, I blasted out my rhymes with grim determination. When I finished the last line my relief was enormous.

By all precedents this volume should have been a failure. It was forced. It was a product of the midnight oil. It was that luckless effort, a second book, written to follow up the success of the first.

A first book is rarely written. It just happens. It is usually a compilation of happy efforts, composed with no thought of a book. A second book is deliberately intended, sometimes even written to order. It is self-conscious, premeditated. There is a difference in collecting scattered verse for a volume, and constructively making one. My second book should have been a dud. . . . Well, it wasn't.

It succeeded because it was sheerly of the North. It was steeped in the spirit of the Klondike. It was written on the spot and reeking with reality. All of it dealt with the sub-arctic scene. There was little lyric verse, and most of the descriptive ballads were over-long, but it expressed the spirit of the Yukon more than anything I have done. Technically it was an improvement on my first work, and as usual I revelled in rhyme. Altogether I thought I had made a neat job; so, with every confidence I sent it to the publishers.

What was my dismay when I received a letter telling me they were loath to publish it. Anger succeeded amazement, and I immediately telegraphed them to hand the manuscript to a rival firm. I received a wire by return: *Reconsidering decision. Await letter.* This made me madder than ever. I wired back: *Reconsideration superfluous. Have advised other firm to take over.* Then I received a telegram from the other firm: *Will be glad to publish anything you write.* So, sitting pretty, I awaited the arrival of the next mail.

There were two letters, one from the rival firm, offering to take the book on my own conditions. The second was from my publishers. In their first letter they had complained of the coarseness of my language and of my lack of morality. As a highly respectable firm with church connections they thought its publication would reflect discredit on their reputation. Also on my own. They suggested I scrap the book and write another of purer tone. Now, however, with my threat of publishing elsewhere, they entirely changed their position. They begged me to make certain minor changes, and to leave out one particular ballad dealing with the Tenderloin.

I thought it great fun pitting one publisher against another. Cynically I sat back and enjoyed myself. I wrote, pointing out that I had no reputation to consider, and that morality had nothing to do with literature. However, I wanted all my work to appear under the one imprint, so I said I would remove the offending ballad, but it would cost them five per cent. more royalty. It did. . . .

Thus ended my first fight for freedom of expression. The book was a success, and soon after I had a cheque for three thousand dollars.

## Chapter Three

### DAWSON DREAMER

HAVING completed my five-thousand-dollar plan I at once entered into a second one. Ten thousand would put me in a spot where I could thumb my nose at the world. And it looked as if that delightful gesture might not be far off. My American royalties, coming in an ever-increasing flow, were augmented from England, so that I likened my bank account to a pool being constantly fed by small streams. It was a pleasant thought that the work was done, and I had just to await the rewards. That is the most charming thing about authorship—having written two books I could now sit down and do nothing for the rest of my life.

As it was, I did nothing for two years. After making a book by furiously working for four months, I let my pen lie idle for another twenty-four. I loathed the thought of writing and wondered if the desire to express myself in authorship would ever return. And in all my life thereafter my work average has been about four months in two years. Between whiles I let my mind lie fallow, dreamed and loafed. It's fine to do nothing at all, and for two years I did it exultantly. That is, as far as the bank would let me. I was drawing my salary and had to earn it. But with the slipping of the town my duties became so light they ceased to weigh on me.

Clear of my work by four o'clock, I would go for a two-hour tramp up the snowy trail along the Klondike. At night, if there was a moon, I might climb to the Midnight Dome. The evenings gave a choice of diversion. There was always the skating rink with bands twice a week, and although the town was on the skids there were still numbers of pretty girls. But on the rink all girls looked charming. Their eyes sparkled, their cheeks glowed and they chattered like magpies.

There were also snowshoe parties when we climbed the spruce-clad hills to the glow of torches. Or straw rides on sleighs, singing to the jingle of bells as we returned to the mess for supper. Bob-sleighing was less to my liking. We had a bob that held eight and used to coast from the hill to the river bank. We had spills and bruises and, as we crossed the town, my heart was often in my mouth. If ever we encountered traffic I shuddered to think of the consequences. And one night we did. . . .

Our steersman was a corporal of the Mounties with the reputa-

tion of a dare-devil. He took us down the hill like a flash and we streaked for the level of the water front. Before us was the main street and the snow bank of the river. At that late hour there should have been no traffic, but suddenly a team emerged from the night. It was pulling a big sleigh loaded with goods for the creeks, and it was right in our path. I tucked in my head and closed my eyes. We all did. We were packed so tight it was impossible to extricate ourselves. I thought: Curse bob-sleighting. Now what's going to happen?

Nothing did. We heard the shrill whinny of horses and the shouts of the driver. Then we were a hundred yards away, safe on the Yukon, while the freighter was driving on. We stared at each other then looked at our captain. He grinned: "That was a close call. I couldn't take you past the heads of the team so I took you under their bellies. Anyone kicked?" We answered cheerfully in the negative, but agreed to call it a night.

As regards indoor recreation, there was an embarrassment of choice. We had two dances a week and frequent balls. There were also card parties and dinners. At dinners, even in the best-heated circles, one's feet were freezing under the table. Silk socks and patent leather shoes were poor protection against the Arctic cold. Better be snug in bed with a Whodunit yarn.

Yes, it was a glorious time—not much work, lots of fun, money flowing in. I was in the pink of health and incredibly happy. I recited at concerts and helped with dramatic shows. I danced into the small hours. I did everything but curl, drink whisky and play poker. I looked on curling as an old man's game, while hooch and cards meant spending money, and I was determined to save mine. For my precious capital was mounting month by month and freedom glowed before me like a star.

But with summer all that changed. The rush of work absorbed our vitality again and social pleasure almost ceased. Once more I was kept busy in the bank and the best I could do was to take a fishing trip on Sunday. I usually went up the Klondike, and it was on these excursions the idea came to me: "Why don't you write a novel of the gold rush? You have the field to yourself. The most colourful episode in Northern History is there to be put in fiction form. No other writer knows the Yukon as you do. There's your chance. It's really up to you."

I let the idea incubate in my mind, and soon it imposed on me as something I *must* do. It seemed a duty. My book must be an authentic record of the Great Stampede and of the gold delirium. It must be tragic and moral in its implications, a vivid scene painted on a big canvas. The characters must be types, the treatment a blend of realism and romance. It must be. . . .



Anyway that's how I visioned it as I whipped two-pound greyling from the pools of the Klondike, not far from the scene of Carmack's discovery. No doubt it was bumptious of me to conceive myself as a novelist, but I had two successes to my credit and my confidence was unbounded. Although in other fields I was diffident, when it came to roping up a bunch of words and licking them into shape I felt I could hold my own with most. Maybe I couldn't, but I believed I could; and if one thinks one can do a thing, and tries hard enough, one generally can.

So there I was, happy again in the coils of creation and with my Klondike novel crystallizing in my mind. It seemed already as if I had the whole proposition clinched. My book would be the only fictional record of the gold rush. I would document myself like a Zola. I would work on old sourdoughs and get their stories. I would brood over the scenes they described till they were more real in my mind than in theirs. It would be I who suffered their hardships and exulted in their triumphs. Vicariously I would be one of the vintage of ninety-eight. I would re-create a past that otherwise would be lost forever.

Grandiose dreams! Glorious conceit! It's great to believe in oneself. It's half the battle. I leapt to high heaven and came down clutching handfuls of stars. I envied no one on earth. I felt I would shirk no hard work, no sacrifice to attain my end. I, personally, did not matter, only my job. In those days I would have cheerfully given my life to write one immortal book.

So wrapped in delicious dreams the summer passed and once more winter locked us in. Now was the time to tackle the field of fiction. But to my disgust I found I could not settle down to write. I had my stuff in the bag, yet I could do nothing with it. My words came with difficulty, my imagination lagged. Something was wrong.

Then I realized that I needed seclusion to brood in. Contact with others threw me off my literary stride. I craved isolation to write easily, and if I could not write easily I could not do so at all.

One day I was brooding over this when the Manager called me to his private room. "What have I done now?" I thought, and felt I did not care very much. But instead of keeping me on the carpet he told me to take a chair.

"I have here," he said impressively, "a telegram from the Inspector. You are appointed relieving Manager at White Horse and are to report immediately. That means you'll have to leave by the first stage. Short notice, but it's promotion and I congratulate you."

My first feeling was pride that I was considered fit to fill a manager's post; my second, dismay that I was unfit. A manager's job! Why, it would worry me to death. I am a meek soul. I cannot give orders

to others, though I find it hard to take them. I am incapable of authority. I could not refuse a customer a loan, though I would be afraid to grant him one. I would lie awake nights worrying over my securities. I who dreaded responsibility would have all the care of the branch on my shoulders. It would be perfect hell. . . . And then again, I did not want to return to White Horse. I always hated an anticlimax. Besides there was my novel. I was all set up to do it and I could only do it right here. It was the thought of my coming book that most weighed with me. Oh no, it was quite out of the question that I should leave Dawson. Doubtless the Manager thought I was overwhelmed by the prospect. As I sat there speechless, he was giving me time to grasp my good luck.

"Of course," he said deprecatingly, "the appointment may only be temporary, really a sort of Vice-Manager." At last I found my tongue. I said slowly: "The 'vice' part would be all right; I don't know about the other."

He stared. "Why, don't you appreciate your promotion? I think you are most fortunate."

I said: "Maybe. I know I should jump at the job. There's only one obstacle in the way."

"Obstacle! Why, what could that be?" I thought again of my novel. That seemed to outweigh everything, but I could not tell him so. Then suddenly I heard my voice speaking. I listened to it and to my amazement I heard it saying: "It's just that I'm . . . resigning. I'm giving three months' notice that I'm leaving the bank."

There! The monumental decision was taken. I breathed freely again. I went on: "You see, sir, my literary work is having considerable vogue at present. I want to follow it up by writing more books when the going's good."

He gave me a long look. "If it's a fair question, how much are you making?"

"Oh, about five thousand a year from my books and a thousand from the bank. Six in all."

He sort of gasped. "Why, it's more than I'm making myself." Then like magic his manner changed. He dropped the manager stuff and met me as man to man. He was friendly and affable as he went on. "You're probably right. Nothing like striking while the iron's hot. Grasp your opportunities. The trouble is we bankers don't get any. If I were in your place I would certainly take a chance. So instead of congratulating you on your appointment I congratulate you on your judgment in refusing it. Well, I will write the Inspector you have resigned and you can hand me your formal letter to that effect."

So I went back to my cage, but I was a little stunned. I was not

so sure of myself. I composed my letter with a feeling that perhaps I had been premature in my bid for liberty. I am timid and I fear the irrevocable. Perhaps my impulse had been foolish. Well, I was on my own now, pitted against the world. I had burnt my ships and I wondered if I had been wise. . . . But the next mail reassured me. In it was my bank book and I saw with a heart-bound that my balance ran to five figures. Not very far, but just over the ten thousand mark. Almost unbelievably I looked at the total. And to think that only a few years ago I had been gnawing a banana peel and trying to kid myself it was a beefsteak. Now I had a stake for life. The interest on this would keep the wolf permanently from the door. And I vowed nothing would pry me loose from my nest-egg.

From that moment I lost interest in money. I told the publishers to place all royalties to my account, and I never knew to a few thousands what I possessed. Three rivulets were feeding the reservoir of my fortune, but I ignored them. I became as indifferent to filthy lucre as I had formerly been keen. It seemed just a series of book-keeping entries. It was hard to realize I could turn those symbols into material possessions. Anyway, I didn't want material possessions. I wanted freedom—two square meals a day, some rags and a roof.

And that reminded me—I had to seek another home. I found one in a cabin high on the hillside. Behind it was the mountain; below, the valley of the Yukon. The view was inspiring, the isolation all I could have wished. But what attracted me was a pair of moose horns that branched above the door. They seemed a symbol of success, like the Winged Victory.

The cabin was of logs with a porch on which I slung a hammock. There was a sitting-room and bedroom, both furnished with monastic simplicity. The sitting-room had a small table, two chairs and a stove. I had a drum fitted into the stove-pipe, so that the heat was conserved and I could dry clothes inside. The draught in the stove was so good I could light a fire in two minutes, and in ten the sides would be glowing red; then I could choke it off so that it would burn for ten hours. In the bedroom I had only a bed, a double one with good springs. I heated water on the stove for tea, but I took my meals out. I ordered a load of wood, bought an axe and chopped enough for months to come. I hung my photos on the wall, bought blankets, flannelette sheets and some cushions. I had the sitting-room painted a pale blue and a double door put on. Everything was snug and shipshape in what was to be my home for two years.

Came the day when I was due to leave the bank. I am afraid I rather sentimentalized the scene. I made my usual entries in the books, told myself I was doing them for the last time. I put away

the friendly tools of my trade and looked round the office where I had passed so many peaceful hours. I kept saying: "It is the last time I will ever do this . . . and this. Good-bye for ever." It was characteristic of me that I should try to feel sad and exploit such an occasion. Of course, much of my emotion was phony.

Yet I will always be grateful to the financial institution that took me under its wing and sheltered me so many years. The work had been pleasant, precise and profitable. I had been comfortably looked after and treated with more consideration than ever I had known before. I will always have a kindly feeling toward the bank, and if I had to start over again I might begin in a worse way. If a man has no particular talent, likes an uneventful life, and has domestic ambitions he should appreciate the paternal care of a Temple of Mammon.

I passed my last evening in the mess with the same regret. It had been the scene of many a wild night of souse and song. We were a Rabelaisian gang, but we were in tune with the rugged North. The mess was like a club where good fellows got together and the hooch-bird sang. The latch-string was outside the door, the glad glass waiting. Despite the racket, I had consummated a book there. Well, I no longer belonged to it, and as I left it was as if a door had closed irrevocably on my past.

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## *Chapter Four*

### *MY FIRST NOVEL*

NEXT day I trudged up the hill with my belongings and installed myself in my new home. What a wonderful morning that was! With what joy I arranged my cabin! I was keyed up to such a pitch of happiness that I brimmed over in dance and song. As I stood on the porch looking down on the town, my heart was bursting with gratitude. One is lucky to be content with little and to find satisfaction in simplicity. I would not have exchanged my cabin for the palace of a king.

It seemed strange to pay for food again. I adventured in restaurants, experimenting with caribou cutlets, moose steaks, chops of young bear and gamey cuts of mountain sheep. My morning meal of ham and eggs I took in a bakery kept by an old Norwegian. I attracted others there and soon his place became a centre for light refreshment and social gossip. He afterwards expressed his gratitude to me for having popularized his beanery.

I kept fantastic hours. Sometimes it would be two o'clock in the afternoon when I had breakfast. Once I went earlier, but the main street was abustle with lunch-hour animation. It gave me an uneasy feeling to see those people working while I was doing nothing. It didn't seem right. Here I was like a spectator, able to stand back and watch their scurry and worry. And they were really working to pay me the interest on my capital. But that was how the world was run. Not for me to cavil at a system that allowed me to make my life one long Sunday.

One afternoon I went down to the bank and interviewed the Manager. I asked: "How much do bank shares bring in?"

"About five per cent."

"Can you buy me ten thousand dollars' worth?"

"Certainly. Just give me your cheque."

So I got quite a thrill writing my first big cheque, and a few days after he sent me a note telling me the shares had been bought and stood in my name. I had installed a telephone in my cabin so I rang up and thanked him, but I added rather unkindly: "I worked for years for you and now you are working for me." I don't know

what his reactions were, for he rang off abruptly. But I chuckled: "Let the bank prosper and pay me dividends." And it did prosper, for the stock boomed and bonuses were frequent. In these days I seemed to have the Midas touch, but strangely enough I did not care any more.

And all this time I could not settle down to work, for I was enjoying the casual and irresponsible life that best suited my temperament. I would take supper about ten in the evening and smoke and talk till midnight. It was the bohemian life in the shadow of the Pole. Going home to my bright cabin I would read to the early hours, then sleep till eleven. I would exercise, bathe and descend to town for a leisurely breakfast, returning about three for a siesta. At five I would make tea and strum a guitar, after which I would go for a tramp on the mountain. I did a lot of physical culture, took many cold baths and practised self-massage till the muscles rippled under my skin. It was this passion for physical fitness that made the debauchery of the town repugnant to me.

That winter was bitterly cold. I remember taking a walk with one of the bank boys when it was seventy-two below zero. We wore moccasins, coonskin coats with collars turned up, and fur caps with flaps over the ears. Our faces peeked rosily through a halo of icicles formed by our breath. Our lashes and eyebrows were hoar with frost and my friend's moustache was tusked with ice. Our hands were in big fur mittens that hung from cords around our necks. In that intense cold death lurks uncannily near. One's breath comes in gasps and the kidneys function with dangerous frequency. We were climbing the Moosehide trail when suddenly I noticed a putty-like patch on my friend's cheek.

"Hold on," I said. "Your cheek's frostbitten." So I took a handful of snow and held it to his jaw, and all the way home we kept applying fresh handfuls till we reached the first pub. It proved a mild frost-burn with peeling of skin; but if I had not noticed that livid patch it might have been serious.

I, too, had a frostbite, but on a portion of my anatomy that my notorious modesty forbids me to mention. It used to get so cold at night in the cabin that the blankets around my head would be sheathed with ice from my breath. Often I would have to rise and replenish the stove. One intensely cold night I got up to do this, but found my firewood was stacked on the porch. To dash out and fetch a log would be the work of five seconds, too quick for the cold to catch me. So I made my dash, but to my horror the cabin door snapped behind me. I was shut out in my pyjamas at sixty below zero.

The door was stout, the lock a Yale. Impossible to break in. The windows were double and beyond my reach. What to do? The

cabin was in a lonely spot and it was the dead of night. In a few minutes I would be frozen stiff. Suddenly I thought of the back door. It too was locked, but the bolt might be old and worn—it was my only hope. In my slippers I plunged through a snowbank and made a frantic rush at the door. At the first onslaught it gave, at the second the bolt burst from the rotten wood; at the third I fell headlong into the cabin. Never did I feel so thankful. I soon had the stove cherry-red, and it was while I was warming up I discovered my frostbite. It speedily yielded to treatment, but it was some time before I could sit down with comfort.

To keep me company in the cabin, I had a dog and a cat. The cat I rescued as a kitten on the frozen trail. It was mewling frantically when I picked it up. I took it home and fed it hot milk, and that night it slept under my blankets. I never knew such a cat to purr. I loved having that atom of affection close to me in the icy night. I became very fond of the little thing, and it was so attached to me it would try to follow me to town. But one day in early spring a malamute must have caught it, for I found its mangled body in a snowdrift. I missed it every night, curling so contentedly under my blankets.

My dog was, I think, the biggest in the Yukon. He was a Siberian bearhound, the colour of a desiccated sponge. He had a trick of rearing up and putting his front paws around my neck, so that he looked down on me. In that position he would hug me and try to lick my face. He looked like a bear, with small eyes and tiny, pricking ears. He was very powerful and had a great reputation as a tail-dog in a team; but he was cowardly, allowing the small, fierce huskies to bully him.

I bought him in White Horse for twenty-five dollars. He was called Mike, and was one of the pack I used to take with me on my woodland rambles. When I went Outside I sold him to a miner in the Klwane country. Then one day as I went my tramp up the Klondike who should appear bounding along the trail but old Mike. One would have thought he had been following me all this time and had found me six hundred miles from where I left him.

He greeted me with wild demonstrations of affection, seeming to have attained a dog heaven when I took him home to my cabin. There he would sleep on the porch and accompany me on my tramps.

He had a savage streak in him that only the Wild would satisfy. From time to time he would get restless and go off into the hills. Then one day he disappeared and never came back. Perhaps he had a lady love up the creeks, or perhaps he ate the poisoned meat of some trapper. In any case, he was a crazy hound and quite in

character with the country. I never understood him, but being inclined to like animals more than humans, I missed and mourned him more than a little.

And yet I could not get started to work. The more I thought of it the less I liked the idea. You see, I was still savouring the joy of perfect freedom. Despite a few pangs of conscience, I was perfectly happy doing nothing at all. But was I doing nothing? I was keeping fit and absorbing Yukon lore by every pore. With every breath I was unifying myself with the country. At times it seemed as if I had never lived anywhere else. I was saturated with the spirit of the Wild.

I went long tramps up the valley of the Klondike and visited its famous creeks. I stayed in roadhouses and lonely cabins. I took part in clean-ups and listened to the yarns of old-timers. In town I sat in saloons and eateries, questioning with avidity sourdoughs who had come in over the trail of ninety-eight. In the Carnegie Library I read everything I could find on the country, and in its cellar I dug up files of the *Dawson News* that covered the early days of the gold camp. It seemed as if I relived that prismatic past. I read every government blue book till I felt an authority on the Yukon. At that time I thought I knew more about the country than any man living. And still I could not get down to work.

Perhaps another reason for my reluctance was that once I made a start I would be the slave of my task till it was completed. With me it had to be all or nothing, carefree idleness or concentrated effort. I am not one of those who can write till noon and call it a day. I cannot put the job out of my mind and go off to play golf or bridge. My work is with me all the time. I shun society, never read a book, sit silent at meals and talk to myself on my solitary walks. When people speak to me I find I am not listening. So much am I absorbed in my world of imagination that the real world almost ceases to exist.

Such being the case I dreaded the day when I would again surrender to the thrall of authorship. Yet I was primed to the muzzle with Yukon lore and finally it took a big New York publisher to pull the trigger. One day I received a telegram: "Would be interested in Yukon novel. Will pay ten per cent. royalty. Wire if accept." I wired back: "Will write novel but want fifteen per cent." By return I received a telegram agreeing to my terms. There, I was once more committed to servitude.

Happily it was early spring, when the creative impulse is strongest, and I felt a sudden eagerness to work. I bought a bunch of exercise books and a sheaf of soft pencils and began my novel; and for the best part of a year I gave myself up body and soul to my concep-



tion of the Great Stampede and the hectic days of ninety-eight. There in my cabin on the hill I scribbled and dreamed, either swinging in my hammock on the porch or sitting by my stove. When my brain was weary I would walk in the hills or tramp up the valley of the Klondike. But my mind was rarely off my book. I lived, ate and slept with it for many long months.

I now think I had a colossal nerve to write a novel for a high-class publisher—I who had never published a line of prose in my life. But I had a superb confidence. If dynamic force went for anything I might have been a budding Balzac. I flattered myself I had the equipment of a novelist, though I disliked detail and scorned psychology. I adored Stevenson while Conrad bored me. I delighted in Daudet and yawned over Turgenev. That gives the measure of my mind.

On my visit to the Coast I had met a famous editor and a not-so-famous writer. The first told me: "A good novel is a good story. Everything else is secondary." The writer said: "Let your characters live and make your story for you." I felt like saying: "If they cannot make a better story than yours I prefer to let them die." However, I merely asked: "What if the story they write is a bore?" He said: "If it is the integration of the characters, it is a work of art." So I started my book in his way, perhaps because it appealed to my lazy mind. It seemed a good idea to sit still and let one's people do the work. I had no story, no scenario, no plot—not even the faintest idea of one. I had all kinds of material and a desire to do something big with my mass of documentation, but I left it to my characters to blaze the trail for me.

For a time all went swimmingly. I wrote in the first person, which is the easiest way. To avoid any charge of false psychology I exploited certain phases of my own character in the person of my hero. I made him a romantic dreamer, unable to come to grips with reality and at odds with his environment. He was sensitive and unpractical, a fumbler and a weakling. Yet he had a certain moral strength and courage. In contrast to his rough surroundings he was refined in his tastes and invariably in a false position. In short, like myself, he was destined to failure; but while I escaped by a fluke, I took it out on my poor devil of a hero and gave him the works.

My heroine was purely imaginary and unimaginably pure. Even in the dance-halls I preserved her virtue. At the end, where I let her be seduced by the fascinating brother of the hero, my publishers objected so that I had to rewrite the last part of the book, disproving her seduction. I think they were right, and I have never been able to have for a heroine in any of my novels a girl who was not an inspiration to virtue. I called her Berna and claimed I had

invented the name. In reality, it was the brand on a can of condensed milk.

It was easy going for the first third of the book. I high-lighted the trials of the trail; I depicted with realism the delirium of the gold-greed; I tried to sustain as an over-motive the lofty spirit of the Yukon. Imaginative description was easy for me. I let the scenes pass before me as if they were being unreeled on a film and just wrote them down as I saw them. I conceived everything so vividly words tumbled over themselves in an effort to express my vision. I raced ahead with a verve and gusto that nothing could check, then . . . one day I seemed to come up against a stone wall. For it was evident that my book, while vividly descriptive, was lacking in story interest. Atmosphere alone will not put over a novel. To hold the reader I would have to inject romance into it, invent a plot, create a villain. I can honestly say that I am humbly grateful to those who read my work, and I would hate to let a reader down. Thus, rather late in the day, I realized that the story is what matters, and so I called a conference of my characters and put it up to them. But here, for a little variety, let me try the objective method. . . .

The author lounged in his hammock and his brow was corrugated with care. In his hand he held a copy-book and pencil, but the page was blank. Before him, seated on the porch, were his hero and heroine. Behind them were other characters, but they were "bit" people and did not matter so much. Further back were a bunch of extras who did not matter at all. Frowningly, like a Hollywood director, the author spoke:

"Look here, you bunch of stiffs, I'm about fed up with you. You're letting me down. Here I have created you, tried to breathe the breath of life into you, conceived you as real as my own family—and you're acting like a lot of stuffed monkeys. I was told that if I gave you rope you would make me a story, but so far the story you've made is 'lousy.' It's sloppy; it doesn't jell. What I want is conflict, suspense, drama, all that makes a story punch. I've given you incident, colour, action, but you've not played up. The romance angle is weak. The high-brow chap told me to let you stand on your own feet and go your own gait. You, my dear heroine, are working as a hash-slinger. And you, my precious hero, are—well, a bit of a bum. Now have you any suggestions as to how this yarn is going to pan out?"

"Can't you let me make my fortune in the gold-fields?" said his hero. "Then we can marry and live happy ever after?"

"Nothing doing. The happy ending is out. I've got to make it tragic. I've got to consider the art angle. This 'boy meets girl'

situation is all wet. I can never let you have a fade-out in each other's arms nor give you a baby to suggest domestic bliss."

"But you're not going to kill me," said his heroine, bursting into tears. The bit men and extras looked sad. He was going to do just that, and already was feeling bad about it. When the time came he, too, would shed tears, but he would do the job. However, he tried to reassure her.

"Oh, I expect things will work out all right, but I must introduce a menace. We've got to have drama. If I get tough with you both it's for the good of the story, so you'll have to take it. And now, my children, go and play your parts in the scenario I will invent for you."

So the author dismissed them and proceeded to construct his story. But it did not come easily. Scenes were tangled, creases hard to iron out. The system of *laissez aller* had gone too far. For a week he sat with pencil poised; he paced the floor; he frowned at his food. When spoken to, his eyes were vacant . . . then as he lay tossing on his bed the solution leapt at him and for the rest of the night he grappled with it. Bit by bit he worried out his plot to the bitter end. When he fell asleep his book was in the bag.

And this, confiding readers, is the low-down on my first novel. In the early morning, feeling like a new man, I began a synopsis of my book. Chapter by chapter I planned it out, even to minor details. Every scene was clear, every situation developed. When I had finished I think anyone could have written that book from my script. And now, having organized my work, I was able to concentrate on each chapter and give it all I had. I went ahead like wildfire. I must admit it didn't work out according to schedule. Story schemes seldom do. My characters asserted themselves, but in the main they were pretty docile. My synthetic villain proved to be the most credible of all. So, contrary to all canons of story-making, I won out. For incidentally the book was a best-seller; was made into a movie and made me a modest competence. The "feel your way" method in my case was a failure, and in future fiction I always wanted to be sure that I had a story before I began to write it.

I did the first draft in five months, average a thousand words a day. There were days I did three thousand words and days I only bit my nails. When the end drew near I became excited and worked like a demon. After a supper of beef-steak and onions, I went home and wound things up. I worked clear through the night till next day. I ran out of copy-books and began to write on typewriter paper, my pencil flying over the sheets. As I finished them I threw them on the floor. Time and again I had to stop because my wrist ached and my fingers were stiff, but my super-excited mind goaded me on.

In all I did over twelve thousand words. When with an exhausted sigh I wrote the blessed words *THE END*, the floor was strewn with sheets of loosely scrawled manuscript. I tiptoed over them to bed, and slept for ten hours, knowing that my book was definitely cinched. No new mother could have been more ecstatic.

After that I worked harder than ever, but with a sense of security that made revision a delight. I cut out thirty thousand words and went over every phrase, testing it and seeking to improve on it. My dictionary and thesaurus were working overtime. I considered every word, wondering if I could not find a better. In three months I made a second draft. Then I began on a final typewritten copy, and although I dislike typing I got a great kick watching my work evolve in print. There it was at last, my novel complete in a bulky and untidy manuscript. Nothing to do but send it to the publisher. Then I hesitated; I was afraid. If it was lost I could never reproduce it. All that labour of heart and brain would be wasted. . . .

I had a swift idea—why not take it to the publisher myself? I said, “You’ve not been Outside for five years. You’ve lots of dough. Pay yourself a trip to New York.” Like a flash I decided to do it, so going down to the booking office, I took a passage for the Coast.



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BOOK NINE  
*CIVILIZATION INTERLUDE*

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## Chapter One

### NEW YORK PATTERN

WHEN I left the High North I must have been a bit of a boor. Or perhaps I should say "bear." Living six years in the sub-arctic does things to one. I had become Yukonized. I talked the vernacular of the mining camp and gloried in its slang. I was steeped in the spirit of the Wild and spoke with scorn of the Effete East. I looked on myself as a roughneck writer despising literary cults. I had never been sophisticated and now I was on the brash side. As one attuned to the Great Open Spaces I professed a proper contempt for civilization. Cities appalled me, especially their slums. How could people drudge and slave in dirt and despair? Used to the clean purity of the North I thought all cities should be blotted out, or at least gardenized. I wanted to keep life simple. I shut my eyes to progress. I was ten years behind the times and found it hard to adjust myself to conditions so strange to me. I despised the smooth ways of society. Saloons were more in my line than salons.

I was now moderately well known and modestly well off. I was reasonably endowed with self-conceit, but masked it behind a becoming diffidence. Yet I felt within me a power of overcoming most obstacles. Perhaps that was due to my fitness. In the Yukon I had been reckoned a tough musher on the trail, and even now I was as hard as nails. I had a sense of intense aliveness that bolstered my vanity. I may have been naïve and ingenuous, even uncouth, but I was quietly sure of myself.

When with my precious manuscript I took train for the East, it was the first time I had been in a Pullman. I suppose the unaccustomed luxury rattled me, for I left my wallet trustingly on my seat and when I returned it had disappeared. As my money was in it, it rather panicked me. The conductor looked worried. He asked me if I suspected anyone. I did—the coloured porter, but I dared not say so. I felt incapable of making a fuss. I was even apologetic for giving so much trouble. Yet I was greatly distressed, and the joy I had felt on entering the train became bitter chagrin. Here was I setting out to cross the continent and all the money I possessed was the loose silver in my pocket. I used some of it to telegraph for fifty dollars to be sent to me in Chicago, and when that was done I had exactly a dollar and sixty-five cents.



And on sixty-five cents I lived for four days. I bought a sack of apples and bag of doughnuts, and that is all I ate during this trip. I dared not spend my dollar, for the Negro autocrat of the car would expect it for a tip. Such was my inferiority complex I had not the courage to deceive him, even if he *had* been the one who stole my pocket-book. I told no one of my plight, though some suspected it; for when they would ask me to go in to dinner I would refuse, saying I had no appetite. Then with jaws drooling I would wolf an apple and a couple of doughnuts. I reflected: "It is good to fast from time to time. Upton Sinclair did it. Bernarr MacFadden does it." I took courage from the examples of these great men. I sought forgetfulness by working over the manuscript of my book. But as I revised I felt so disgusted with my work I wanted to rewrite it entirely.

One lady, bless her, suspected my hunger and delicately offered to stage me, but haughtily I told her I was in no need of money. I preferred to starve rather than accept a loan from a woman. It was really very absurd. Several knew me on the train and would have rushed to my rescue. I had twenty thousand dollars in the bank yet I was faint with hunger. Toward the end I became light-headed, but I cinched my belt tighter and told myself I must take it.

We had an hour's stop in Chicago and I assured my friends they would see me back when I had collected my money. I paid the porter his dollar after he had brushed me off, and made myself think he was not really the one who had robbed me. But when I got off the train I had not a cent. Putting my two bags in the left luggage I set out for the First National Bank. I did not know the city and could not pay for a taxi, so it was some time before I found the bank. Then there was difficulty about identification, but in the end I received my fifty dollars. Taking a taxi I told the driver to speed for the station.

I arrived nicely in time to see my train pull out. By one minute I had missed it. I was sorry, for I had made some good friends on that train and now I would never see them again. So I consoled myself with a double order of ham and eggs, after which I settled down in the waiting-room until the next train. There I went to work on my manuscript, correcting happily. My only annoyance was caused by smuts settling on my white collar. In Dawson one could wear a collar a week; here one would have to change it twice a day.

As I drew near to my destination I was keyed up to the highest pitch of eagerness and I addressed myself somewhat thusly: "Young fellow, you are about to achieve another of Life's Great Moments. You are approaching one of the cities of your dreams. You are thirty-eight and you have not yet seen a Big Metropolis. For over twenty

years you have been reading of this one. Familiar names will leap at you and you will realize scenes and pictures for which O. Henry and others have been preparing you. Soon New York will become a part of you. Prepare yourself with expectant wonder for the emotions you are about to enjoy."

This, I think, is a fine mood to anticipate a city. I was possessed by a nervous excitation that was near to ecstasy. How lucky I was! It seemed marvellous to be free, without a care and bursting with rude health. What adventures awaited me? Again and again I hugged myself with happiness, scarce able to conceive my friendly fate. And I have always been like that—romanticizing the future and keyed to high emotion. I have often wondered why others did not get the same kick out of life. To draw human breath is a blessing in itself. With rare gusto I have enjoyed the commonest functions of living. Eating, drinking, sleeping have been a perennial pleasure to me. And with the years this gift has abided.

Only the other day, as I emerged from the public library of Hollywood, I was arrested by the finest sunset I have ever seen. Nearly every evening we have superb sunsets, but this was a masterpiece of sky painting. No words could depict its loveliness. Half of the western sky was dappled with tiny cloudlets pussy-footing over the blue field. Then, from below, the sun got busy on them. He had rare scope for his painting. It was no gorgeous blaze of theatric splendour, but a study in suave tones. The whole composition was of majestic delicacy. The thousands of fretted cloud tufts turned to jewels of softly burning rose; the blue above had the piercing purity of a glacier, while below was an apple-green luminosity that gripped the heart with tenderness. For ten minutes that ineffable splendour lingered, then faded forever from the sight of man.

And I was the only one who beheld it. As I stood there entranced, hundreds passed me by, yet not one stood for a moment to admire. It was for me alone the sky glowed, sparkled, dreamed. To others it meant nothing. I felt like stopping them and saying: "Look, folks, you would pay half a dollar to see this in a cinema, and here it is costing you nothing." And each would have replied: "Because it's costing me nothing, it can't be much good." Then a fellow came out of a hash joint picking his teeth. "Purty, ain't it?" he said. And I answered: "Ya, swell all right." If I had said that it was excruciatingly lovely and we should go down on our knees to it, he would have thought me "nuts."

So, transfixed to my seat, I devoured with my eyes the nearingness of New York. Strange cities awe me. The cumulative approach, the lights, the streets, the houses momentarily increasing in density and heralding the congested core; then the turmoil, the human

millions all intent on their affairs, one's own outsideness—all that gave me a feeling of apprehension, so that I thanked my stars I was well heeled and knew where I was going. I thought of other writers, poor and unknown, who had attacked this city, and I was glad I would not have to starve and strive. Of course there was glory in that, but I did not crave it. I had in my pocket the manuscript of a novel and should have felt a conqueror instead of a craven. But the big city had me scared.

At the Grand Central Station I hailed a taxi. "Take me," I said, "to the National Arts Club." I expected the driver to be as impressed with this swank location as I was myself; but he showed no sign of emotion, and my mind went back to the day I got my address. It was on the Yukon River above Five Fingers. I went up to the pilot house of the *Casca* and saw there a mouse-like man with a palette in one hand and a palette knife in the other. He was painting a stretch of the river from which a rain cloud was driving up. He worked swiftly with his flexible blade, laying on the colours he had daubed on his palette.

"Do you only use a knife?" I asked.

"No, sometimes my brains," he snapped. But when he had finished we fell into conversation and he told me he was a New York artist of fame. He said he had exhibited in all the big cities. He was known as the Miner Painter because he had a mine in Alaska. In proof of this he carried a poke with a score of nuggets which he showed to admiring ladies; but when they suggested taking one, as one takes a candy, he hastily retrieved them. He was the most self-centred man I ever knew. I have always suspected that the greatest egotists are those who seem least so, because the deeper their egotism the more careful are they to conceal it. But he was so naïve in his enthusiasm for himself he quickly bored people. In justice to him, however, his self-interest was centred on his painting, which was the life of his being. He talked continually of his pictures, and if the conversation veered to another subject he showed signs of unhappiness. He was afflicted with a nervous tic that made him wink his right eye and curiously affected his discourse.

"You know," he would say, "when I send a picture to an exhibition in New York they refuse it. Why? Because they know if they hanged me I would kill everything else in the room." (A wink.) "They're afraid of me," he would continue. "I'm too big and strong for them. These brush painters are in a conspiracy to crush me. My painting is so virile it makes them seem emasculated. That's why they bar me from their galleries and boycott me in their press. They're scared of me." (A huge wink.) "But I'll show them," he would conclude. "One day they'll have to admit my greatness. I won't send any more pictures to their shows. No, they'll come to

me, begging me to give them a canvas. They'll realize that I am the finest painter in the United States, perhaps in the entire world." (A prodigious wink.)

He was impecunious, admitting he had only a few hundred dollars in worldly cash. But he pointed out he had a hundred thousand dollars in pictures—if people would only buy them. I was greatly impressed. I saw in him a gnome of genius, painting canvases bigger than himself. As I listened to him admiringly, he ended by taking a liking to me and proposed I occupy his New York studio. It was in the National Arts Club, so that I could have the privileges of that institution during my stay. I counted myself in luck. Not only did I have an address, but one to be proud of.

So I presented my letter of introduction and was received by the Secretary. Soon I was installed in a huge studio hung with the paintings of my friend, and as I looked round with a sense of awe I thought: Not only am I living in one of the finest clubs of the city, but in its most beautifully decorated room. What a change from my bare cabin in the Yukon!

One's first sortie into the strangeness of a big city should be an experience of wonder and joy, and for me New York was a breathless adventure. Only in two other cities have I felt such excitement and nervous expectation. In Paris I hailed a taxi and cried: "Notre Dame." In London I jumped on a red bus to feed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. Here it was the Bright Lights of Broadway.

Soon I found myself in Madison Square and sat down on a bench. There was no sign of the glamorous canyon of my dreams. Round me were seedy individuals with bundles of newspapers which later they would stuff inside their grimy garments. Near me a pasty-faced man stood on a soap-box at the head of a long line of derelicts. He was collecting money to provide them with beds. For fifteen cents a man might sleep warm if not clean. I gave him a dollar and saw half a dozen of the poor devils get tickets for the doss-house. I had been unused to poverty, and this glimpse of human misery harrowed me to the soul. "Curse big cities!" I said, and went on my way grimly enough.

I was going to inquire in which direction lay the Bright Lights when a respectable-looking man took the words out of my mouth. "Please, Sare," he said with a foreign accent, "can you tell me ze way to Broadway?"

"I am just heading there," I told him. "No doubt you are a simple stranger like myself. Come, let us go together and we will find some kind soul to direct our steps."

He pointed to a hovering damsel. "Zere ees a young lady who might give us ze information." Then lifting his hat he addressed her politely.

"You boys looking for the Bright Lights?" she asked in a friendly way. "Well, come along. I'm going that way myself. I will be your guide."

"Oh, zat ees too much trouble," said my friend; but the damsel, who was very blonde, answered: "Not at all. I was once a stranger myself."

Soon we burst into the brilliance of Broadway and wandered wondering up it. The sky signs aroused my amazement, the illuminated announcements over the theatres thrilled me. No rube from the sticks ever gaped and gasped more. I was wrapped in a trance of delight when the blonde whispered: "Say, who's your friend? You'd better look out. This burg's full of bunco steerers. Keep a tight grip on your wad."

"I have none," I told her cheerfully. Then to both of them I related my adventure in the train, finishing up: "At this moment I have not enough to buy you folks a drink. Which you must admit is a sad state of affairs for a newspaper man like myself."

I might have said "novelist," but I thought "journalist" would sound more reasonable. Later on, I might break it gently that they were in the presence of a famous writer of fiction. Then the blonde spoke:

"Say, you're not a reporter, by any chance?"

"Well, in a way. Sort of a free lance. Doing dope on the New York underworld."

They gave me a long stare. Suddenly both remembered they had engagements and they sheered off, leaving me standing alone in Times Square. So, missing their sympathetic companionship, I wandered back to the quiet of Gramercy Park and my palace of art on the top floor.

It was a little bewildering to awake to the sight of scores of huge paintings covering the walls from floor to ceiling. It made me think of my painter friend. On the boat with his palette knife he had produced miniatures, but here he went to the other extreme of ten-foot canvases plastered with paint. He must have worked with a trowel, I thought. His pictures were like flakes of colour pasted on the canvas. You had to stand back to get the effect; yet then it was like gazing through a window on to a real scene. One of his sunsets was like a poached egg that was addled and had burst open. As I shaved I looked at it and thought of the painter with his pear-shaped head on his puny body. A shabby little man with a mouse-grey beard, always blowing his own horn, yet something of a genius.

Having breakfasted at the club, I made my way to my publishers, carrying my precious manuscript. I would be glad to get it off my hands. All the way from Dawson I worried about losing it; twice I

had left it behind me, only to miss it with dismay. Each time it was lying on a bench with a lost look, but so dirty and crumpled no one wanted to pick it up.

My publishers were stricken with surprise to see me so commonplace looking. Said one: "We expected you to arrive in mukluks and parka driving a dog team down Fifth Avenue. Why didn't you? It would have been a great ad."

My meek map disconcerted them. Not even the heel-mark of a brawl in the Malamute Saloon. I had no moss on my bust like a movie he-man. I was as mild as a parsnip. I could see people look at me with an air of disappointment as they said: "You're not at all what we expected." I wondered: What the hell did you expect? And I felt their dissatisfaction reflected in myself. I became a human apology, ashamed that I could not live up to the part assigned to me.

My publishers must have thought their newly spawned author was a poor fish, uncouth and hardly literate. One of them asked me: "Do you feel any nostalgia for the North?"

"Nostalgia," I said; "that's a new one on me. What does it mean?"

When I understood I immediately adopted it, and tried it out on everyone I met, feeling an inner glee when they balked. They thought I was trying to be highbrow and put one over on them. I was. But in the next two months I was to meet many who regarded me as a roughneck and treated me with derision. One author said he hoped I was not going to write one of these dreadful best-sellers.

I said: "One writes to please oneself. If it happens the public is pleased it's just too bad. It is one of those afflictions a poor author has to put up with."

"The man who pleases bagmen must have the mind of a bagman," he told me; but when I mentioned this to the manager of Brentanos, he laughed sardonically. "That's all baloney. These jerks pretend to be above money, but they've all got their ears cocked for the clink of the coin. They're a bunch of climbers, chisellers, publicity hounds. Bah!"

And indeed I found many writers had a somewhat exaggerated idea of their own importance. They were eager to talk of or read their own work. Many carried copies of their books in their pockets. They looked on me as a vulgar upstart, writing for the rabble. Publicly squashed, I shrank into my shell. I was glad when a lowbrow architect said to me: "Poets are indecent. They are literary strip-teasers. Poetry is æsthetic diarrhœa."

No, I was not enjoying New York. The city intimidated me, the literary crowd snubbed me. In my naïve simplicity I asked for it. I was egregiously unsophisticated. At lunches and dinners my neighbours often ignored me. Sometimes I ground my teeth with rage and

cursed cultured people. They were superior and patronizing. More and more I realized I was kin to the man in the crowd. I preferred Childs to Delmonico's, the Bowery to Fifth Avenue.

Besides, too, I was having trouble with my book. When I called to see my publishers they said: "It's big, breezy, but *bawdy*. You'll have to purge, purify. Also you'll have to write a new ending. You must never 'bitch' your heroine." So I did as I was told; but even at that the book was banned in Boston. What would be mother's milk to-day was poison then.

I corrected the proofs sitting in the bay window of the club. I had now become a member and believe I am still an honorary one. If so, I must be one of the oldest, for so many I knew in those days have passed on. Editors McClure and Bob Davis; novelists Hamlin Garland and George Barr McCutcheon; poets Madison Cawein and Will Carleton, these are a few names that occur to me. But as a rule I did not like my fellow-writers. I had a feeling they high-hatted me and were often contemptuous. I was correcting proofs one morning when I heard a shot coming from the other side of the square. I saw a crowd assembling, then a lady member of the club rushed in looking as if she were going to faint. "Poor, poor Mr. Phillips," she sobbed. "He's just been shot." It was Graham Phillips, the novelist, who had been killed by a madman.

The only part of New York I really liked was the Bowery. There was a music hall where they had amateur nights, and I enjoyed seeing contestants get the "hook." As no one at the club shared my vulgar tastes, I went alone. I was happiest when by myself. I kept alive the sense of mystery I had felt on my first night in New York. I ate in cheap restaurants and roamed the slums, the Italian quarter, the Jewish section, Harlem, Chinatown, Hell's Kitchen. All that was sordid delighted me, while the skyscrapers and palatial hotels left me cold. Yet as I haunted Greenwich Village the vagabond in me came out and once more I wanted to be free. Yes, in the heart of the city I had the old obsession to escape. But it was hard to be free. I was getting to know too many people and engagements were piling up on me. Many of them were distasteful yet could hardly be avoided. I was in with the wrong crowd. I disliked those slick, citified people, the marshmallow poets, the addle-pated gabbling women, the affectations and shams of society. I said:

"How sick I am of it! It's not my racket. I'm tired of passing teacups and talking 'arty.' I feel again the call of the road. Let me get away on the gipsy trail. To be foot-loose, in the open air with the spell of adventure luring me—that's my stuff. All this—to hell with it!" So hardly saying a good-bye, I vanished overnight from the New York scene.

## Chapter Two

### HAVANA ARABESQUE

OF course, I had to make a last theatrical gesture, so I remarked with elaborate casualness to my publishers: "I think I'll take a little stroll as far as New Orleans." Now behold me on my way. I bought a celluloid collar and a small valise to sling on my back. I could not travel the hard way any more. In accordance with my *bourgeois* status I was obliged to stop at cheap hotels. I was neither rich nor poor. I could not sleep out, but because of my meagre baggage I had to pay in advance for my bed. People took me for a pedlar. When I explained I was making a walking-tour they seemed to think I was a little crazy, or that I was fleeing from justice.

But I would not have minded if the weather had been good; day after day it rained, sleeted, snowed till I was definitely discouraged. Far too often I was stranded in some one-horse town, kicking my heels in a frowsty sitting-room. If I started in the hope of a fine day I would be wet and chilled before I had gone many miles. I never could get reassuringly warm, and I developed a cough. It seemed that New York had made me liable to bronchial suggestions. For three months I had been too lazy, too well fed, and I was in poor shape for the rough road.

So my halts became more frequent, my stays more prolonged. From a twenty-mile-a-day start I dropped to ten. Yet I was ashamed to give up. New York to New Orleans—what a rousing slogan! What a feather in my cap to walk all the way! . . . Then one day, after tramping three weeks, I found myself resting in the station of a little town just outside Philadelphia. It was raining, but nice and warm in the waiting-room. I was wet and weary and cannot have looked very prepossessing. Presently, I thought, I would push along and find a hotel in the town near by. As I sat there half dozing, a surly-looking man began to sweep out the floor. He looked at me with disfavour. Then he began sweeping around my feet. Finally he made me change my place so that he could pass his broom over it. He kept giving me dirty looks, and in the end he addressed me with a strong Teuton accent: "You petter move on. You cannot sleep in de vaitin' room."

He had spoken to me as if I were a bum. I glared and went over



to the ticket office. "Give me a ticket," I said, "for Philadelphia." Then I had a brain rush. "No," I added, "better make it New Orleans."

With my ticket I went to the porter who was watching me nastily. I said: "Can you read? If you can, look at that. There's my ticket for New Orleans, first class, Pullman, observation car—all the frills. Is it forbidden for passengers to wait for trains in this station? Are you dumb or are you just a son-of-a-bitch? You dare to insult passengers! If you were not such a poor swine I would report you to the station-master."

I had got to the shouting pitch and several travellers were looking at us curiously; so after giving me a look of sullen fury he went away trailing his broom. Perhaps he was right. He may have been over-zealous or he may have been a born bully. I did look a little like a hobo at that moment. . . . Well, he played his part in my destiny. For until the moment I asked for my ticket I never had the slightest idea of giving up. I had bought it in an impulse of anger, but now the die was cast. I would have to abandon my tramp and go by train. New York-New Orleans was definitely out. I had fallen in my self-esteem. I felt a miserable worm, spineless spawn of the Effete East. But an hour later behold me luxuriously stretching my legs in a Pullman drawing-room.

I had let myself down badly, and the thought made me miserable. No longer was I the stalwart of the Frozen Wild. My guts were gone. It was difficult to believe I had braved the trials of the gold-trail—even vicariously. Humbled and disgusted I wanted to go back to Philadelphia and with my bundle on my shoulder swing down the road anew. Then an idea came to me: Why not start from the other end? Walk from New Orleans back to Manhattan? That would be even a greater triumph. I would retrieve my lost honour and as an adventurer stand again four-square in my own eyes.

So staring dismally at red dirt roads I pictured myself swinging along them merrily, mingling with the grinning darkies who now waved to me from their tumble-down shacks. They were picturesque in their rags and they radiated cheer. Despite their poverty one could imagine them indulging in dance and song. The less one wants, the easier it is to be happy. What was the good of slaving and saving? These lazy, laughing niggers had it all over us. They were getting a lot more fun out of life than we were. Work was a mug's game—hard work anyway. Even if their shirts were out of their pants, their bellies were full and they plucked their battered banjos with gusto. Let's all be niggers and to hell with sophistication! Happiness lies in the direction of animalism; education sensitizes us to pain.

These were my reflexions as I rolled on to an unknown fate. And though I had disgraced myself, I sighed voluptuously, for it was very pleasant on that train. Particularly eating an exquisite meal with the panorama of the South flashing on the vision and as swiftly dissolving. As I ate fine food I thought how grand it was to be free to go wherever I pleased on this wide earth, to have no ties, no cares. I was healthy, wealthy (according to my standards), young and avid for experience. . . . Well, I would give myself a year's holiday, wander where fancy willed, leaving my mind open to impressions so that when the time came to take up inkslinging I would have something to say.

Someone told me: "There are three cities in the United States that merit the attention of the connoisseur of cities—New York, San Francisco and New Orleans." The two first had character, but what I wanted was colour. I would discover it in New Orleans in terms of gaiety and poetry. There was the glamour of the carnival, the French atmosphere, the Creoles with their suggestion of romance, the darkies with their barbaric gusto—all that ought to make an interesting picture. In any case it would be something un-American and different. Enough of tall buildings and modern efficiency. I wanted slovenliness, dirt, picturesqueness.

I did not find all I dreamed of in New Orleans. It was picturesque only in spots, and the colour was sometimes drab. I went to the St. Charles, arriving as a ball was in progress in the Palm Room. At breakfast two ladies were speaking French at the next table. They were typically Latin, with big noses and slight moustaches. By their talk they were in town on a visit. They gave me a sense of a big, rambling house on the edge of a bayou, but they were the nearest I got to the stories of Cable.

After breakfast I decided to take a tramway and see something of the town, so I jumped on the first that came along. It was open and the conductor motioned me to a place in front, but as the seats there were crowded I took a rear one. He gave me a queer look, half surprise, half contempt. Then I saw some of the people about me looking at me curiously. Several were grinning and I noticed they were dark people; but I did not mind and grinned back. After a little a woman alongside me spoke to me. She was almost white and had a sweet smile.

"'Scuse me, Mistah, ain't you a strangah in this heah town?" I admitted it, then she went on: "I reckon you don' know you're in the paht of the cah reserved fo' cullahed folks?"

"No," I said cheerfully; "but if you don't mind, I don't."

She said: "That's very nice of you, Mistah, but Ah reckon you better git up foward." I shook my head and kept my place, but the

situation was awkward. I did not like to insult these good people by dropping them so deliberately, yet some of the white passengers were giving me dirty looks. So at the next stop I pretended I had reached my destination and got out. It was then I realized that racially I was colour-blind, and to this day I would as lief take off my hat to a black beauty as to a white.

I found the climate heavy and enervating. During my stay the skies were grey, and I lacked energy to fully realize the charm of the city. The French quarter was run down, the Negro district squalid, the modern town too sophisticated. Also the fine food made me liverish. I had not the zest to present my various letters of introduction. Except one. It was then I encountered the tentacular hospitality of the South. He was head of a big firm that sold office furnishings, and his store, which was three stories, was very beautiful. It was stocked with every kind of up-to-date bureau article, and he showed it to me with glowing pride.

After, he took me to his club. There was a swimming bath fed from a natural spring and it was too tempting to resist. For the first time since my arrival I felt pepped up. Then he gave me a lunch of typical Southern food and drove me for hours in his new car. His hospitality was lavish to the point of embarrassment. He was arranging other engagements for me when I told him I was leaving next day. I had not intended going so soon, but it was my only way to escape his too generous kindness. I said: "I'm departing for Havana to-morrow if I can get a reservation."

He said: "Leave it to me. I know the office manager." So next day I was sitting in the Palm Room of the St. Charles, feeling rather low, because they told me that it was impossible to get a cabin on the Cuban boat. I was cursing my luck when my friend arrived.

"I've just come from the shipping office. They're reserving a state-room for you. You see, we do a lot of business with the company and they are glad to grant us favours." I noticed he was very pale and there were black smuts on his face. I drew his attention to one which he wiped off with his handkerchief. Then he remarked almost casually: "Didn't you see the papers? Our store and warehouse took fire during the night and were burned to the ground."

As I thought of that beautiful building, crammed with costly furniture, I had quite a shock. Then I reflected: "Here he is, perhaps ruined; in any case crushed or crippled. And yet he doesn't forget his promise to look after a paltry reservation for a stranger. In the face of terrible misfortune he remembers the grace of courtesy to one who means nothing to him." I felt touched and humiliated, because I knew that in a similar situation I could not have risen

to such heights of consideration. It was Southern hospitality at its finest, and I bade him good-bye with sympathy and gratitude.

And I bade good-bye to New Orleans with something like disappointment. It was too obviously an American city with the excellent characteristics of a hundred others. I wanted something violently different.

I was to find it in Havana. One's first encounter with an alien civilization is always breath-taking, and as I landed on the dock I cried exultantly: "Here is what I have come so far to see." I had not taken two steps when a hotel runner dashed forward and presented me with the card of his establishment.

It turned out to be a queer place and my bet proved a bad one. It was a six-story rectangular building enclosing a palm court, with the rooms giving on balconies that ran round each story, the whole linked by one weary elevator. This was not enclosed, and you worked it by yourself, so that every trip was a dizzy adventure. So reluctant was it that one expected it to stop every moment and protest.

The balcony of the fifth floor, where I had my room, had a downward tilt to a frail rail that looked dangerous to lean against. Gazing into the abyss below made my head dizzy, but the sight of the third floor made my heart flutter. It was devoted to dames of dubious morality; or at least I imagined so, for their manners had a vivacity and charm one does not find in serious circles. Through their open doors I could see them titivating and chattering, and I watched till some of them waved dainty fingers to me; on which I timorously retired to my room.

I was writing letters when I saw a familiar brown shape running ahead of my pen. I brushed it off, trying to believe it was only a stray, but no. It was the scout of a patrol, and soon it was followed by an advance guard. Looking down at my feet I saw them massing for the attack. Gingerly I got up and cheated them of their coming feast. Descending by a winding iron stair I passed the torrid zone of Latin pulchritude and found myself in a public park. There on a bench I lit my pipe and watched. Under the palms women were parading, their voices shrill, their faces blanched with powder. On the other side perfumed young dandies ogled them and expressed admiration by languishing looks. It was so very correct. The girls had their duennas and the young men respected the conventions. Here was a life beyond my ken, into which I could never enter. Full of loneliness I was deciding to return to my hotel when an American sat down beside me. A wistful wisp of a man, with a ragged grey jacket and a ragged grey beard, he had the look of a derelict. His voice was hollow, his cheeks sunken. He lit himself a cigarette.

"Just in on the boat?" he asked.

"Yes, and you?"

"Oh, a long time ago. The *Maine*. I'm a survivor. But come and I'll buy you a drink."

I was glad to speak to someone, so I accompanied him willingly. We went to a large café where we had difficulty in finding a table. It was a scene of gaiety and animation such as I had never imagined. Lottery vendors, pedlars and beggars circulated in the crowd. News-boys and shoe-blacks, ragged but roistering, threaded the throng. Waiters poising trays of rainbow-coloured drinks wove in and out the tables. Most of the men wore only cotton pants and shirts, but a few had on pressed linen suits. All were smoking, gesticulating, speaking at the same moment. Political discussions were vehement and a nervous excitement pervaded the crowd.

Here was what I had been craving for, something I had dreamed of but never seen. Here was effervescence, colour, emotion. To the devil with Anglo-Saxon efficiency. Give me this open-air café with its tumult, its mercurial gaiety, the stars above the palms, the air like a caress. Give me this street seething with ardent movement, this high-pitched, hectic living. Turning to my companion I said: "This hits me just where I belong."

"You can have it all for me," he said. "Give me the American way of life—the corner drug store, hot dogs and ice-cream sundaes, cinemas and Main Street and a dance in the Elks Hall on Saturday night."

"Why don't you go back?"

"My lungs. I've gotta live in a hot climate. Besides, the going's hard over there. Here I make a living fairly easy, guiding round tourists. Say, can I take you to a show—real Cuban dancing, hot stuff?"

"Maybe later on. Just now this is show enough. It's gorgeous. No colour bar, no puritan inhibitions. Sheer animal enjoyment, irresponsibility, elastic morals. Yes, picturesque dirt, idleness, procrastination, I'll accept all that for the freedom, the glamour that goes with it. Let the Nordics sweep their stables speckless, give me the Latin way of living." And today I feel the same. I suppose it is the spirit of the gipsy. I prefer the thymy Thessalonian hills to the regimented tulip gardens of Holland. Let me live in slipshod loveliness where pleasures are many and duties are few. I'd sooner sit in a pew than a pew.

Suddenly I remembered I had not eaten since noon, but I felt more thirsty than hungry. I mentioned this to the man from the *Maine*. "I'll order you a refreshment that is both food and drink," he said.

In big, tall glasses the waiter brought a delectable decoction called a *pina fria*. Half of a ripe pineapple was pulped into a cocktail shaker, and the remainder cut in small cubes. Crushed ice and powdered

sugar were added, and soda water sprayed on the mixture. When shaken up, what a drink for the Gods! Often after, I worked up a thirst just to feel this ambrosia flooding my fevered throat.

I lingered in the café, for I hated to return to my hotel. "The bed is of wicker and bamboo," I told my companion, "and I suspect every crack is colonized."

"The local variety is very vicious," he said; "but you get used to them."

"I won't. Damned if I'm going to provide a feast for Cuban pillow-pigeons. I'm going to make a night of it. You're hired as my guide. Come on, show me some stuff."

He took me to a honky-tonk where a rough audience yielded to their instincts with carnal delight. The sketches were pornographic, and, though I could not understand the language, actions spoke louder than words. But what really interested me was the guitar playing and the dancing. The Cuban dances were given with a freedom and verve that brought cheers from the audience. It was savage and barbaric, but it was art. I often returned to this place. For the price of a beer I could have a grand show. Its very badness made it good, and to the last I loved the fervour of the guitars, the frenzy of the dance.

I asked him to take me to a proletarian pub and he guided me to a cellar that was like a pirate's den. The *patron* was a squint-eyed, scrubby old reprobate. There were huge barrels of wine round the walls, rough wooden tables and a stone floor. The roof was vaulted and supported by pillars of stone. This was my guide's pet haunt where he was greeted by his cronies in their own tongue. Frequently I heard the name Dolores mentioned and he explained that it was his Cuban wife. He spoke of her with such impressiveness he made me think she must be very beautiful. He told me she was much younger than he, and I saw in my mind a slim, small figure with a waxen skin like some of the Cuban girls I had seen. No doubt he thought a lot of her, for he often glanced at the door as if expectant of her coming.

I suggested food, so we had a clear bouillon in big bowls, into which two eggs were broken. This we ate with coarse bread and garlic, and for drink we had the juice of limes with a dash of rum. As the night went on our drink gradually became rum with a dash of lime till soon I felt pleasantly tipsy. Ever and anon my companion kept giving those anxious glances to the door, as if momentarily he awaited the arrival of his Dolores. Poor little devil! I felt sorry for him, he looked so whipped in the struggle for survival. An outcast, hopeless, forlorn in an alien land. With the recklessness of rum I determined to play God, so I said: "What's your first name?"

"Michael."

"Well, Mike, I tell you what I'll do. If you want to go back to New York I'll stake you to your steamer fare."

He gave me a startled look, then shook his head. "What could I do in New York? I'm a failure here; there ain't much chance of me being a success there."

I saw his point. In fact I saw him starving in the bread line or shivering in the bed line. I said: "Haven't you got any folks back home?"

"None as I know of. Guess they've all passed on. No, in the North I wouldn't last six months with this chest of mine. In the South I'd only be a bum. Here I've got a home, anyway."

I mused: "What a silly ass I am! Of course there's his child-wife, frail, lily-like, adoring. Poor little Mike! Doesn't want to leave his Cuban cutie. I can understand it all now. Mike and Dolores . . . love idyll . . . beautiful. . . ." An alcoholic haze was pervading me. I felt myself dozing delightfully off. Suddenly I was roughly aroused. Shrieks, shufflings, shouts mingled in my ears and I opened my eyes bewildered. And there was my meek little Mike being mauled and maltreated. His assailant was a huge hulk of a woman able to make three of him, and she was hustling him from the door with the fury of a virago. *Dolores*. And the worst of it was she was black as the ace of spades.

I have a vague memory of ordering drinks for the crowd, and of girls who jabbered and giggled at the *Americano*. Then I was awakened in the early morn by the bristly Pirate who presented me with my bill wallet. He tried to assure me by signs that nothing had been stolen and that we were all good fellows. So I went on my way liking the place a lot and vowing to return.

In the clear, cool dawn I found my hotel. Before going up to my room I breathed the pure air under the palms. If only it could always be like this! But later the unescapable heat would come. Well, I would try and get some sleep before it became unbearable. The barnlike lobby of the hotel was deserted, and the air was stale as I allowed the elevator to lift me wearily to my room. It complained querulously all the way. My little friends were waiting for me and gave me a hearty welcome, but I was too tired to appreciate their attentions. Half dressed I threw myself on the inch-thick straw mattress, folded in four the attenuated bolster that served as a pillow and slept profoundly till noon.

"Ruined by prosperity," I muttered bitterly, as I gazed at myself in the mirror of my bedroom in the Hotel Madrid. It was amazing how, living easy-like, I put on fat. I had been in this *chic* hotel for three weeks and must have gained six pounds. The food was too good. Funny how memories of food linger after æsthetic emotions are effaced. I have forgotten what I saw at the Opera, but I remember

a dinner of *quail en casserole* with mushrooms and green peas. Every evening I dined at the hotel and saved my appetite for the moment I would smack my lips over the *menu*. Apprehensively I looked at my waist-line, half expecting to see a water-melon curve.

The hotel was elegant with palms, flowers, beautiful tiles and giant cockroaches. They scuttled over the floor like animated brown saucers. I trod the tiles gingerly and fearfully examined my bed. I kept my feet hooked in the rungs of my chair, though no one else paid any heed to the roving roaches.

In my fray against fat I wandered far and wide, exploring the narrow streets of Havana where naked children played before fashion shops and bullock carts contested the way with polished limousines. Somehow, I preferred the carts to the cars. To the devil with progress and machinery! Give me the slow old days when folks had time to think. So in my fight to frustrate fat I walked furiously to outlying beaches and swam in tepid, shark-infested waters. These swims gave me a feeling of elation, but also a capacious appetite. Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt! I sighed and hated the sight of a weighing machine.

I used my evenings to explore the night life of the Tenderloin. To the pure all things are pure. I came to know devious characters in the labyrinths of the underworld. That of Havana was large and lurid; but, though I frequently went there, my interest was artistic and literary. I also paid visits to the Pirate's Den, hoping to see my meek friend Mike. The ruffianly boss was always glad to greet me, especially as I set up drinks for the house. I enjoyed that raffish atmosphere because I understood nothing of the conversation and could stand outside the scene like a spectator. There were some gipsy girls who sang, while a sinister guitarist played *flamenco* style. He gave me some lessons and I made fair progress.

Oh, I was having a wonderful time! Every afternoon I had a three-hour siesta, which did not tend to reduce my weight. As I looked at myself in the glass I began to hate the mug that stared back at me. Then one day I plucked up courage and weighed myself. One hundred and sixty-five pounds! More than I had ever scaled in my life. Well, I must do something about it.

I conceived the idea of walking to Santiago. I got maps and planned my route. It seemed plain sailing. The heat would be no greater than that I had endured on the Mexican desert, though more humid. But there would be frequent villages and I could pay for the best accommodation. So making final arrangements I started out with the high hope of taking twenty pounds off my weight. But it was not so simple. The humid heat reduced me to a pulp, the villages were collections of hovels with the crudest of food and shelter;



But the worst was my lack of knowledge of the language. I should at least have bought a phrase book. I was helpless and had to make signs for everything I wanted. Not once did I encounter anyone who knew English.

In the fields they were cutting the sugar cane, much as we had cut corn in the North. Most of the workers were black, but the others ranged by a variety of shades to a flat, dull white. There was no colour distinction. The blacks were jolly and plump, perhaps due to the sticks of sugar cane they were constantly chewing. They grinned at me as I passed, but the lighter colours looked at me with lack of interest.

On the third day I reached Matanzas, where I found a fair hotel. However, the town was a God-forsaken place with little life and no comfort. I was glad to rest a day or two, for my feet were sore and I was sick of the road. I was horribly bored. I had nothing to read, no one to speak to. I moped around the dead-alive buildings trying to find something to interest me, and I ate the rough food with distaste. But above all I thought of the play-boy life I had led in luxurious Havana. I longed for the gleaming napery of the Hotel Madrid, its fine food served with servility. I thought of my noctambule adventures, my swims in the surf. What a fool I was to be trudging the dusty road in the blazing sun when I could be enjoying a siesta in a cosy bed! I hated the idea of slogging on to Santiago and I loathed the Cuban countryside. Alas! my sybaritic spell had sapped my strength. My guts were gone. I was the slave of self-indulgence, the victim of prosperity.

The result of my megrims was that I took the train back to town. I was bitterly self-reproachful, but I could not face the road. Once again I had failed to live up to my conception of myself. I was beginning to learn the lesson that success is often failure, and that only by work and achievement can happiness be gained. I should have forced myself to take the hard road and thereby saved my soul.

Back in Havana I resumed the old way of living, but in a modified degree. I had lost a few pounds on my three days of walking, so I went on a diet of one square meal a day. But some meal! For the rest I ate fruit and sipped coffee whitened with goat's milk. In my room I went in for a course of physical culture. I walked, swam, sweated. Soon I began to look better. My eyes brightened. I could sing and see the funny side once more. Failing really strenuous action, I was getting a grip on myself. Even in the velvet coils of civilization I found that with discipline one could gain to gusto in living.

But I was fed up with the heat. That relentless sun-blaze got me down. There was no escape from it. How I longed for the snow and

tonic air of the North! I was sated with the South. Then one day I sat on the Prado turning over the pages of an American magazine. I was bored and at a loss. The air was heavy and close, that cursed sun like a furnace. Then my eyes fell on an article headed: *I Had a Good Mother*. Suddenly I thought: I, too, had a perfectly good mother. She was living in Alberta and I had not seen her for thirteen years. I would do the prodigal son in reverse. I would return to the old homestead, pay off the mortgage and make the acquaintance of my family. My mind went back to Roselea Terrace when I had said good-bye to them so casually. I would walk in as if I had never been away. I would say to the old lady: "How about a spot of tea? By the way, in case you don't remember—I'm your first-born."

So yielding to sentimental emotion I packed my faithful Gladstone, bade farewell to my Havana haunts and started out for the virile North.

## Chapter Three

### PRAIRIE IDYLL

MEMORY is a fickle jade who often preserves the trivial, while matters of moment she disdains to record. She will throw the mantle of forgetfulness over a prank with a princess while keeping alive a bean-feast with a barmaid. In review she will present life as a series of scenes separated by blackouts. So at least it was with me; for from the time I left the luscious delights of the Cuban capital until I found myself skimming over the snow of the Alberta prairie, I can remember nothing at all. It is unfair to assume that I was in an alcoholic stupor over that interval; but rack my memory as I will I cannot recall anything that happened in those three weeks. Probably nothing did.

Anyway, here I was in a cold that was far below zero, driving a hired team with jingling bells through a white world of winter loneliness. Afar off, looking so tiny on that vast plain, loomed what I had been told was the family home. What a romance that was! From the grubby city street to the pure peace of the prairie; from shabby gentility to the freedom of farming in a virgin land—surely a contrast to grip the least dramatic imagination.

Through the deep snow a toe-path led to the frame farm-house. As I knocked at the frosted door it was cautiously opened to reveal the face of a very pretty girl. This must be one of my sisters, I thought; but which I could not guess, so I said: "I represent the Encyclopædia Britannica. Perhaps I could interest you in that monumental enterprise."

At that the door was opened wide enough to reveal a cosy but primitive kitchen. A little, elderly woman was washing dishes at the sink, and a tall, comely girl was thawing out a newly born calf by the stove. Then the little woman came forward drying her hands.

"Why, if it isn't our Willie." We Scotch are economical of our emotions. We exchanged the same conventional kiss we had indulged in when I left, nearly fifteen years before. My sisters were introduced and I pecked at their cheeks.

"What about a cup of tea, Ma?" I said. "I could do with a spot."

"I'll put the kettle on right away. Look at the wee calfie we've just brought in. It's nearly frozen."

So I hefted the dogie up on its wobbly legs and helped to rub it down. It seemed like old times when I had twenty of them under my care. Soon I was drinking tea and eating cake and my home-coming was complete. Then two stalwart boys came in and were made acquainted with me—my brothers. They grinned and we shook hands. When I left home they had been children, but the farm life and the new country had made strapping lads of them. Back in the city they might have been puny weaklings.

I soon got to know my family again. My mother proved to be a spare little woman of intense activity. She loved the farm life and never regretted the shabby gentility of a city suburb. I had known her as rather sickly and tired; now she was almost pathetic in her eagerness to be brisk and bright. She laughed a great deal, and I felt happy to see her so happy. But they all were. That was one of the happiest of homes, three boys, three girls, full of health and high spirits, and the old lady smiling cheerfully in the background. I can honestly say I have never seen a sweeter home than that humble steading nestling on the vast loneliness of the prairie.

The farm-house and barns stood on a section of rolling land, and half of it was under wheat. My mother had also a bunch of cattle and some horses, which were wintered out but seemed to survive the hardship of the climate. Here in sunny Alberta the cold was not too intense and the weather was dry and bright. The prairie was not flat as I had imagined it would be, but of undulating country pleasantly varied by wooded groves and pretty lakes. My folks had chosen well.

They had settled there because it was a Scotch community, and indeed many of the settlers were from our own city. Despite a strange and cloudless sky it was like a bit of Scotland. Most of the young people preferred the new land to the old; but the elders, like myself, regretted the grey skies, the stone cottages and the old-fashioned ways. Few lose affection for the country of their birth. Even a slum may have fond associations.

The family told me of their first coming, how they had lived in tents till their house was erected. They were unused to hardship but soon developed the spirit of pioneers. They fought a great battle and won out gloriously. All day they worked hard on the land, and in the home my mother was the animating spirit. She was a valorous little woman. Having ten children did not seem to have impaired her vitality, but perhaps had bolstered it; for she lived to be eighty-five and played a good game of bridge to the last. She had very rosy cheeks and very blue eyes. Her recreations were cards and detective novels. She laughed a lot. Young people flocked to the house every evening because she loved the company of youth and always felt

young herself. There was a piano on which one of my sisters played brilliantly, though she had had very few lessons. I, to whom music is a passion, would have given a year of my life to play as she did.

So every night it was just like a party in that house. Young fellows swarmed round my pretty sisters like bees, and every evening the lonely farm on the prairie was the scene of youthful merriment. When it was not singing and music, it was cards—usually a round game, like hearts or euchre. I did not join in this sociability, lying on my bed reading while I listened to gusts of mirth from below. The company were too young for me; besides, I never cared for cards.

However, music drew me like a magnet. I would go down and play some of my own songs on an old guitar that, so far, had served as a wall decoration. My songs were successful with the men and no doubt atoned for my social indifference. At ten we had tea and cake, and soon afterward the young fellows unhitched their broncos and departed to their lonely bachelor soddies. Another jolly evening was a thing of the past.

We often had Scotch friends for meals, and rarely have I heard such hearty laughter as resounded round our board. Yet my family were poor people. The farm did not pay, and only my mother's income of two hundred a year kept it going. I remember when I presented my sisters with small cheques how pathetic was their joy, and how they spent hours over the catalogues of the big mail-order houses. And how we gave a dance for the entire settlement in the school-house for which I footed the bill. These were joy spots that cost me next to nothing but meant so much to them. To-day I am sorry I did not do more to bring them sunshine.

Yet they were happy, and in after years I have heard my sisters say their best years were those they spent on the farm. They were quite unspoiled and pleased with small things. Money means so little in the long run. And as for myself, those prairie days are precious in retrospect. There was no foul weather in that land. Every day was a flawless jewel, from the sunlit circle of the snows to the sapphire serenity of the sky. Between them the midget that was "I" roamed the solitary trails, loving his aloneness and communing with the silence. . . . How strange and rich life seemed! Yesterday the skyscrapers of New York and the palms of Havana. Cuba was beautiful, but soft and unclean. All hot countries are. It takes the cold to purge and purify. In the austere North the world was clean, hard, bitter, bright. The vermin were exterminated. In the Yukon I never heard of lice or bedbugs and even the dogs were flealess. The Yukon! Ah, that was a grand country! . . . Here was my first hint of a growing nostalgia for the North.

Every morning I would take a shot-gun and strike across the

snow. For three hours I would follow the trails, shooting the prairie chicken that scarcely troubled to rise at sight of me. When their weight grew too heavy I would curse myself for having shot so many. The family did not thank me for my bag. They cut out the breasts and threw away the rest. When I realized that, I ceased to kill them.

Glorious, unforgettable days! The coming of spring woke in me oldtime ecstasies. With eager joy I watched for every sign of Nature's awakening. The snow cringed, caved in, then suddenly vanished. With its promise of bounty, the brown earth was smiling again and the trails were clear and dry. They invited me with friendly greeting. The gophers barked fussily from their burrows, and the starlings veered in clouds. Every half-mile there would be a round lake, like a mirror to the blue sky, speckled with noisy ducks. Following the old buffalo trail I would meet herds of cattle, but it was dangerous to approach them on foot. Badgers came from their holes and once I shot at one. It crawled out of sight and I hoped I had not hurt it. Even then, to take life gave me a pang of remorse.

One evening I was returning home when I saw such a lovely beast approaching me down the trail. At that moment it looked as big as a bear, so I up and fired. It lay still. I did not know what it was, but its fur was so pretty I decided I would take it home and skin it. Accordingly I slung it by its tail over my back and started for the house. Soon, however, I became aware of an odour that made me think of escaping gas. Sniffing the air peevishly, I murmured: "There must be some disagreeable herb growing hereabouts."

So I kept to the breezy ridges where the odour might be swept away, but it persisted. Suddenly I got a whiff so overwhelming that I choked and gasped and put my pretty burden to the ground. Poor innocent! How sorry I was I had shot it. Well, it was too heavy to carry all the way home; so after a few attempts to skin it with my pocket-knife I decided to leave it and return on the morrow. But that odour, like stale gas and burning rubber, still haunted me, and indeed seemed to develop new depths of nauseating intensity. Even in windy space I could not shake it off, and began to wonder if it was not I who stank so abominably. As I approached the house the dog ran joyously to greet me; then suddenly its wiggling and tail-wagging ceased. It cowered, shrank away and ran howling to the barn.

There was no one around at that moment so I sat in the kitchen; but that horrible stench prevailed to such an extent that I was driven out. Then I took refuge in the dining-room, but I could not escape that overpowering smell. Unhappily I wandered through the house, resting awhile in the bedrooms of my mother and sisters, till desperate, I took refuge in the sitting-room. Lying on the sofa I lit

my pipe, but even tobacco could not kill that devastating aroma. So after wandering around the house and visiting all the rooms in a vain hope to find fresh air, I flopped on my bed. And as I lay there I heard my mother and sisters returning. Then suddenly screams of dismay. Then voices: "It must be in the cellar. Go, look." "No, you. I dare not. Oh, isn't it appalling? Where can it be?" Now they were going gingerly from room to room, sniffing and peering. "It's here too—— Gracious! The whole house stinks. Where in Heaven's name can it be?"

Presently my mother knocked at my door and entered. "Don't you smell anything?" she said.

"No," I answered innocently. "But stay . . . It may be my imagination—there does seem a faint perfume in the air. . . ."

"It's dreadful," she cried. "The whole place reeks. It's a SKUNK. There's one in the house. How did it get in? Whatever shall we do?" Suddenly she approached me with the skin of her nose wrinkling up. "Why, it's *you*. You're the source of it all." Turning she fled from me and anxiously I followed. But my sisters also screamed at my approach; in fact, at that moment the whole family disowned me. As I stood in the open air I felt a pariah, and I hated myself enormously.

Of course, my clothes had to be burned, and for a week I took my meals in the garden. At first I could hardly choke the food down. A pigsty odour was lily of the valley to that. Then gradually it grew more faint, and after I had had my hair cut I became approachable again. But I passed a lonely moment; and all because of a beautiful little beast with an innocent white collar, whose skin I wanted to present to my adorable mater.

One day I was roaming the prairie, enjoying my own society but thinking of getting home for tea, when suddenly I noticed that a gloom had come over the sky. The sun was dimmed by a haze and there was a smell of burning on the breeze. Then I saw that the southern horizon was obscured by a grey cowl of smoke that momentarily grew closer. . . . There was something sinister in that cloud. It looked so hot, so ominous, and it was billowing forward with alarming rapidity. Then it dawned on me that this must be that most dreaded of menaces—a prairie fire. With rising excitement I watched it. That grey wall of billowing cloud rising to the heavens was indeed an awe-inspiring sight. Although it was still half a mile away, it seemed to overhang and encircle me, so that the gloom deepened and the choking heat increased. I saw groups of trees in its path suddenly engulfed and lightnings dart from the black fumes. The grass was high and there were many clumps of willows that fed the flames. The smoke towered like a wall; the crackling and

roaring increased, and like a tide the fire came on, overwhelming everything in its way. Flights of birds were streaming past me, while the dry meadow grass was alive with small animals fleeing from the devouring dragon.

I thought I had better be moving too. I walked rapidly at first, but soon broke into a trot, then a run. It was amazing how the flames were gaining on me. Now I could see the lapping waves of fire overrunning the rank hay grass, and bushes flaring into a blaze. I began to think I was in definite danger, for the smoky wall extended on both sides and was fiercely pursuing me. All I could do was to run for my life. I remembered there was a slough near, and with a wild sprint I gained it. Cowering deep in the water, I saw the flames surge to the shore. The slough was about three hundred yards long and fifty yards wide, too far for the fire to leap. It frizzled the sedges in the shallows, but was checked by the deep water, where I cowered half suffocated. However, I saw that soon it would circle the pool, sweep round and roll on victoriously. And there on the other side, a quarter of a mile away, was the farmhouse on its slight rise of ground. It was in imminent danger. Half swimming, half floundering, I crossed the water and ran for home.

Arrived there, I found excitement and fear in possession. One of my brothers was trying to hold the frightened horses while the other ploughed a furrow around the barns. My sisters were fixing sacks on brooms to beat down the flames. I got a shovel and joined them. The fire was not long in reaching us. It came on with such fury it seemed it would engulf us, but when it met the double furrow the boys had ploughed, it faltered. Then the five of us fought it up and down the furrow, flailing madly. At one moment it seemed as if the stables would catch, but the ground was trodden bare at that point and the flames could get no hold. For some time it was touch and go; till at last we got the burning spear-grass beaten to a smoulder and saw the flaring smoke canopy pass us on either side. We were saved but quite exhausted, and over our tea we talked hysterically of the ruin we had escaped.

That night I went for a walk over the prairie. Everywhere it was smouldering, sparkling and flaming up. As the night was pit-black, the fire-lit vastness had an effect of marvellous beauty. The fire was dying, but its embers glowed and sparkled like living gems. The scene was fairy-like, yet because of its great scope rather terrifying. The horizon to the north was lurid, and everywhere were blazing furnaces of houses less fortunate than ours. But in the morning all one could see was charred devastation and lingering eddies of smoke.

With spring came the old temptation to take the trail. The road with its change and adventure called to me and I longed to go



beyond the far horizon. I would escape from domesticity and let the sun and wind work their will with me. So I took staff and satchel and started out. I had no idea where I was going, but the North drew me like a magnet. I kept to roads that consisted of furrows in the grass and avoided towns. The lonely spaces lured me; the pathless plains gave me a sense of freedom.

I marched twenty miles a day. The rigours of the road drove the toxins from my blood, and after the first two days my eyes were bright, my brain alert. I strode along, singing joyously and blessing the whole world. Three months of stuffy security had made me slack, but soon again I recaptured the delight of the trail. I was what is called a "stopper." When I tired of the march I halted at a farmhouse and asked for a bed. It was the law of the prairie that no one be refused hospitality, so for twenty-five cents I had a room for the night and paid a little extra for meals. When I left in the morning the housewife was glad of the dollar I gave her.

The prairie was settled by communities of many peoples. One night I would be in a Norwegian village, the next in a Roumanian settlement, then in a district where only French was spoken. This diversity added to the interest of my journey, which was otherwise void of adventure. True, in one place I was taken for a liquor spy and nearly run out of the village. Prohibition was strictly enforced, and a few days previously a stranger had begged for a drink of the local innkeeper. A prosecution followed. So when I asked the same host for a glass of beer he took me for another "stool." I could not convince him of my innocence and departed in an atmosphere of hostility.

For ten days I tramped, and must have covered two hundred miles. It did me a power of good. The tonic wind cleared my brain of cobwebs and the growing green welcomed me as a friend. I was grateful to Nature, who greeted me with smiles and adorned herself for my delight. Here the prairie was varied in contour, broken by lakes, groves and streams. There was no flatness, no monotony and every turn of the trail had its surprise and interest.

The folks who took me in were kindly. Unfortunately, most of the time I had to talk by signs. The French settlements were lively and easy-going. The Scandinavians were orderly and serious. The Slavic settlers were crude and semi-civilized. Sometimes when I approached their primitive cottages the children would run from the back door and hide like savages. In answer to my signs the woman of the house would sell me some bread and I would go away gnawing it. It would be heavy as a stone and about as hard; but toward noon I grew so ravenous I could have eaten a raw turnip with appetite.

It was strange and interesting to a born tramp like myself. My

superb health made the road one of rejoicing. And perhaps it was this sense of strength that awoke in me a longing for the High North. I wanted to keep going till I reached the land of the Midnight Sun. And then it was I made up my mind I was going back. But I was travelling the hard way this time. No more easy trips by boat and train and sleigh. I would pack and track like the pioneers. I would go in over the old Edmonton trail.

So I got back to the homestead and announced: "I'm returning to Dawson." There was general surprise. One said: "Are you crazy? What is there up there? You have the whole world before you. You are free, well off. You can visit the Far East, the Pacific, India, China. The great cities of the world await you. What a wonderful time you can have! And here you are going back to a ghost town where you'll be as lonely as hell."

"That's just what I want," I said; "peace and quiet, to be far from the world. My family are delightful, but I want to smoke my pipe and dream in the great stillness. I see my little cabin on the hill. It's calling me to return, to swing in my hammock, with the moose antlers arching over the door. I was so happy there, away from it all."

Yes, I felt the Yukon was my country. I knew it better than most. I had spent the happiest years of my life there and I had written:

There's a Land and it beckons and beckons,  
And I want to go back, and I will.



BOOK TEN

*THE SPELL OF THE YUKON*



## Chapter One

### THE ATHABASCA

I TOOK the stage-coach from Edmonton to Athabasca Landing. It was a two-day trip, and we stopped overnight at a roadhouse. There was a shiny automobile which claimed to go there and back in the same day. "Tain't possible," said the driver of the stage, contemptuously squirting a stream of tobacco juice in its direction. "It's all of a hundred miles, and that young jerk thinks he can make it with his benzene buggy in four hours. I'd hate to take a chance on it. Machines ain't never a-goin' to take the place o' hosses."

I agreed with him. It would have been nice to arrive in Athabasca Landing for lunch instead of two days later, but, "It can't be done," I told the driver.

"Never will be done," he said, cracking his whip. "Oh, I grant you there's some good in machines—sewing-machines and harvesters, and the like, but it don't do to expect too much. Horseless carriages ain't practical. Why, some day some crazy mutt will be claiming that they can make us fly in the air like birds. It don't make sense." I agreed it didn't. And later on I more than agreed, for the car that passed us so proudly was stuck in a mudhole. The chauffeur hailed us and we pulled it out. The springs were broken, so we left it stalled by the side of the road.

There were four other passengers. One was a drummer for drug-store supplies. He was making a first trip to the Landing and figured he was a pioneer. Later he told me his orders had far exceeded his hopes. He was very kindly, but knocked two of the others. "English nobs," he said. "They think themselves better than everybody else."

"You have to understand them," I said. Could one never get away from these race enmities? Being Scotch, I got along with everyone. But the two Englishmen ignored the drug-store man while I tried to be neutral.

The fact that they were going into the North with me made it natural that I should be friendly with them. They were brothers, one a mining engineer, the other a naval officer. They were going into the Coppermine country to prospect, and had an outfit for two years. The engineer was tall and wiry, serenely confident and absolutely without fear. Otherwise he was a leader of men and would have made

a splendid soldier. The brother was trim and well set, with a naval appreciation of discipline. A third was travelling with them, a Swedish doctor who was inclined to be melancholy.

Athabasca Landing was then a huddle of shacks; but it was booming, and that night at the hotel it was difficult to get a seat for dinner. My neighbour was a grizzled old-timer. When I offered him a cigarette he said: "I ain't got no use for them pimp-sticks." He told me of how he had discovered an old Indian woman on an island in the river, where she had been left to die according to the custom of her tribe. He said: "I made a raft, dumped her on it and started her down stream. I figgered that drownin' was better than starvin' to death."

We could not get beds at the hotel, so a Chinaman who ran a hash joint let us sleep in his back room. It was bare but clean. I spread my blanket on the floor and rolled in it. I cannot say I slept like a top, for the floor was no softer than any other, but I gloried in its very hardness. I was roughing it again, and I felt the exultation that comes from doing things the hard way. I did not even envy my companions their cosy sleeping-bags.

The next day was spent in preparations for our departure. The Landing was a-bustle with spring activity, and the Company was the centre of all movement. I went into the office, where two men were standing over a blueprint. It was a plan of the newly conceived town-site.

"There you are," said one, "a chance to make your fortune. There's a corner lot you can have for three hundred dollars. In time it will be worth three thousand." If he had said "thirty thousand" he might have been nearer the mark. At that time I think I had enough money to buy up the whole townsite; but I am glad I did not, for then I might have become a multi-millionaire, and such a fate I would not wish on anyone.

I was introduced to the second of the two, and right there I met the great man of the Mackenzie. Just as Joe Boyle was King of the Yukon, so Jim Cornwall was Lord of the Athabasca. They were of similar type, stalwart and handsome. With their strong frames and bold features they might have been Roman emperors. They typified all that the word Man implies. Both were pioneers, fearless, confident, dominating. And here I wish to pay tribute to two of the great men of the High North—Klondike Joe and Peace River Jim.

At an early hour the following day we started out. We had two canoes, in one of which were the English brothers, and in the other the Swedish doctor, and Indian guide and myself. The guide was young and husky, but inclined to be sullen. He sat in the stern while

I sat in the bow and the doctor amidships. We all paddled vigorously; that is, the doctor and I did. Our Indian friend seemed to think that his duty lay in steering, though the river was smooth and offered no obstacles. So he sat wafting his paddle wisely in the water, while we dug in like niggers. In paddling there is always a tendency to think the other fellow is not putting as much guts into it as you are. It's so easy to let the blade slip through the water. I've even done it myself.

But sitting in the bow of a canoe slipping down a strange stream is a joy hard to match. Especially if the river has a good current, is narrow and deep, and turns corners every few hundred yards. One looks ahead with expectation, if not with excitement. There was a mother duck with a swarm of ducklings that kept in front of us for miles, squattering and protesting. She had not the sense to draw into the side, but sought safety round the first bend. So presently, when we rounded the corner, there she was protesting our passage as if she owned the river. Only the coming of night relieved the situation.

In a gap in the brushwood we landed for lunch and lit a fire. We had bread, butter, canned salmon and tinned pineapple, copiously washed down with tea. Around three o'clock the Engineer, who had constituted himself leader, gave us each a slab of chocolate. So for ten minutes we drifted, blissfully chewing. I have always been an ardent chocolate eater, but never did I appreciate it as I did then. As reluctantly I resumed my paddle I was muttering: "You damn fool, why are you doing this? You don't have to. You might be lounging in the lobby of a hotel with a cigar and a cocktail, or toying with a teacup and chattering to an incendiary blonde. These others are going in on business. They hope to make a fortune. But why are *you* doing it? Just because you have a silly notion in your head that you want to do something with a tang of adventure. Bah! you fake pathfinder, you phony explorer, turn back while there is yet time."

But I knew that nothing would have made me turn back, and I was happy in the thought. I was going to accomplish something worth while. I was even prepared to risk my life. I was young, strong, active, and I had not enough sense to be scared. A fifty-fifty chance of survival was good enough for me.

We made camp just before nightfall. I put up my little mosquito tent, cut some brush, spread my slicker over it and used my kit-bag for a pillow. We had supper of tinned soup, bacon, jam and tea. In the morning we had bacon, tea and marmalade. As these are typical meals, I will not repeat our menu.

The night was cold and damp. I shivered under my big blanket and envied the others their sleeping-bags. I rose to a misty, miserable



morning and took with much distaste to a river steaming in the rising sun. These heavy, overshadowing trees and mud banks were depressing.

At dinner I learned the reason of the lack of geniality on the part of our guide. The scows bearing supplies for the Company's posts had gone downstream a few days before. He should have made one of a hilarious party, but he had been told to wait behind and take me in a canoe. He missed his merry comrades and resented me. I reciprocated his resentment. Through long unuse my canoe muscles were flabby, and putting them to work for nine hours aroused them to painful protest. They were reluctant to resume, but there was no respite for them. The two Englishmen surged ahead, and for the honour of Scotland and Sweden we had to keep up.

So I turned my crankiness on my guide who lolled so loftily in the stern. I could understand that a canoe with two paddles a side would need a steersman, but I failed to see how the feeble efforts of a Scotsman and a Swede called for one. Of course, he was supposed to be a white-water man, though no boulders mushroomed up to meet us and the only rapids were ripples. I could have taken his job, but I had not the nerve to demand it. To my mind he looked on me as a sucker and he was playing me for all he was worth. So I gloomily humped tons of water past me, and cursed myself for letting my poor biceps in for this galley-slave stuff.

Fortunately, the river widened and became more interesting. We were in an oil region. The banks showed signs of it. In spots they looked like asphalt. There was a strong odour of oil in the air; it floated like a scum on the water, and when we flung down lighted matches the nearby river was covered with a blue flame.

Toward evening we heard a roaring in the distance. It grew louder and soon we came on the cause of it. Rising about twenty feet into the air was a flaming jet of natural gas. It had been vigorous and vocal for twenty-five years, and I am told it is roaring and blazing to this day.

I was mighty glad that evening when our leader decided to make camp. It was fairly late and our crew was disgruntled. The doctor was paddle-peevis, the guide vicious. He expressed his irritation by suddenly starting to paddle. And what paddling! Our puny efforts were put to shame. With every stroke he seemed to lift the canoe out of the water. His paddle bent almost to breaking, and the river surged and swirled around it. His example gave us guts, so that we swept ahead of the other canoe with shouts of derision. The Englishmen rallied to the challenge, but it was of no avail. They could not catch up, and soon we heard them shouting to call it a day.

It was with joy I rigged up my one-man tent. I must have done

this a hundred times during the trip and I never failed to get a kick out of it. It was so quickly and easily done. The tent consisted of an oblong sheet of canvas with a rope dividing it, and cords at each corner. You attached one end of the rope to a tree and the other end to another tree and pulled it tight. You attached the cords to shrubs or roots, also pulling them tight. Your canvas made a roof, sloping on each side of the central rope, and from the interior dropped mosquito netting forming a space about seven feet by four. It could be set up in a minute; then rains might drum and mosquitoes hum, but you were dry and immune.

Sometimes I would cut boughs and spread my waterproof dunnage bag and my slicker over them. Then wrapped in my seven-point blanket, with my shirts for a pillow, I was so happy I did not envy the others their snug sleeping-bags.

On the afternoon of the third day we caught up with the fleet of the Company. A dozen barges were strung along the bank as then supper was in preparation. We were allotted one of them and the canoes were lifted on board. As I joyfully relinquished my paddle, I marked for the first time a grin on the face of the guide. He said: "You heap good canoe man. You work very good. Next time I let you take him steer." We parted friends, but I resolved there would be no next time, as I ruefully massaged my aching muscles.

A dozen passengers were distributed over the barges and they received us with that patronizing friendliness old voyagers reserve for new. We installed ourselves in the hold of our vessel that was loaded with flour; then, going ashore, we erected our tents. The captain of the flotilla, a chunky Dane, had selected a camp site on a grassy bank and the scene was cheerful. A cook was preparing mulligan stew, tables and benches had been set up, and the various passengers were whiling away the time until the bell rang for supper.

I made myself acquainted. There was an Indian agent and his assistant, the first Canadian, the other English. Already their two wives were at loggerheads, yet they were going to pass three years together. I foresaw heaps of trouble.

It was jolly, however, to sit down to a decent meal again. We had soup, fried hash, beans, hot biscuits, wine and coffee. The rest of the evening was passed in lively conversation, but quite early the camp was asleep. The Indians curled in the holds of the barges, while I was happy and snug in my tiny tent.

I felt still happier next morning when we embarked after a ham and egg breakfast. I had nothing to do now but make myself comfy and behold the banks go by. Also, I was able to enjoy my laziness the more by watching the work of others. For the barge was propelled by Indians with huge oars. There were four on each side and the scullers

had arranged little runways of flour sacks up which they ran, then fell back, letting their weight be the power behind the stroke. Like machines they worked together, with grunts when it came to the pull-back. They saved themselves all possible strain; but for eight hours a day they kept it up, three steps forward, three back.

I watched the banks of the widening river. I read, I dozed. It was pleasant but boring. I looked forward to meals and felt I was putting on flesh. I enjoyed the picturesque scene, the string of barges, the timing oars, the steersman in the stern with his long sweep. The Indians depended on this trip. They made enough out of it to keep them in grub for the rest of the year. Though they worked hard, they seemed to enjoy it, and their camps at night were songful. The sailing of the Hudson's Bay fleet was a gala occasion from which they took some sobering up.

There was nothing to mar the pleasant monotony, except when it rained and we had to cower under tarpaulins. We crawled ashore for a meal below a stretched awning, then slunk back to our shelter in the hold of our barge. It was hot under cover and the mosquitoes were pestiferous. I regretted my little tent.

The only exciting spot on the trip was the descent of a series of rapids. The Engineer suggested we get out a canoe and run them. It was a needless bit of bravado, but I felt I must take part. So I sat in the bow as we tackled the tossing river. I loosened the laces of my high boots and when we reached the danger-point I prudently slipped them off. The Engineer gave me a contemptuous look, but he happened to be wearing moccasins. I saw he had no confidence in me. He warned me to sit still and leave everything to him; but when a big boulder suddenly shot up I poked it out of the way. We slewed sideways, half turned over, and it looked nasty. However, a canoe takes a lot of upsetting, and before I had time to be scared we were in smooth water. Behind us was a swirling, tossing welter of white foam and brown boulders. But if we got through triumphantly others were not so fortunate. One of the barges ran on a rock and had to be hauled off. The steersman said he was so distracted by our adventure he could not concentrate on his own job. The accident was blamed on our canoe, and from then on we were forbidden to do these silly stunts.

Fort MacMurray was a bustle of spring activity. We were welcomed with enthusiasm, bringing news and booze. The little settlement was hectic, and the whisky-starved population was making up for lost time. The scene was like a fiesta, for it was the end of months of cold and deprivation and the opening of a season of sunshine and plenty. It was hard to realize what our arrival meant to those few whites,

half-breeds and Indians; that it was their only contact during a whole year with the outside world.

Canoe, scow, steamer—that is a pretty progression toward comfort, and I was able to appreciate my stateroom in the boat that was to take me on the next stage of my journey. I lost no time in installing myself. True, the cabin was misty with mosquitoes, but my curtains were snug, and from behind them I watched the angry swarm that craved my blood. I enjoyed their efforts to get at me, while their ferocious hum was music in my ears.

I donned moccasins and slacks and prepared for a spell of delicious laziness. In the week that followed I lolled the deck, watching the Indians unload the scows. I enjoyed seeing them work because my own efforts were confined to filling and smoking my pipe. Spitting in the river, I laughed to think that I had done with the battle of life. I had gone so low there was no lower, and I had fought my way up. Still in my youth, I need never do another tap of work. I need never think of money, because for every dollar I spent I made two. It seemed fantastic—rags to riches. A knack of romping rhyme had brought me fortune.

So smoking my pipe I watched the Indians load the boat. They were carrying sacks of flour aboard. They had slings and head-bands. Four sacks was the accepted load, but as I watched, one of them told the chargers to put on an extra sack. Then waving to me he climbed from the hold of the barge to the deck of the ship. He was a small man and no doubt was packing twice his own weight. But these fellows were woodmen. They had not the puny legs of the canoe Indians.

At last we were loaded and ready to start. As we edged into the stream I was not sorry. I looked forward to my coming adventure. I found that my design to go to Dawson gave me a certain glamour; but the Indian Agent, an ex-parson, took a gloomy view. He said: "You're not going alone?"

"I hope so," I said airily. "I'll need guides to cross the divide, but once I get to the Yukon watershed it should be plain sailing."

He shook his head solemnly. "Young man, you're going to your doom."

It wasn't very tactful of him, was it?

## *Chapter Two*

### *THE MACKENZIE RIVER*

**I**T took us a week to switch cargo and start on our trip down river. Before we left I saw the Indians begin their long track back to the Landing. They took the barges in stages upstream, one at a time with about a hundred men on the hauling line. Attached to the big rope were looped tump-lines, and each man threw himself eagerly into his harness. As they strained and tugged they shouted and cheered. It was a Volga boatman scene, only these fellows seemed to enjoy their effort. They were barefooted, the banks were steep and wooded, the going hard; but they had been doing it for years and at the end was home and rest until another spring.

Our way down river was so leisurely it seemed casual. We stopped at small trading posts and were welcomed with pathetic joy as we left supplies for another year. The white men were like children, innocent of the outer world and unused to company. Many had a strained, furtive look. Their avidity to greet us and their sadness to see us go told of lonely lives in a hostile setting. When the steamer returned it would pick up their season's pack, leaving them prisoned again for many midnight months. Such a life would have driven me mad. Perhaps it did them, a little.

Always amphibian, I never could see water but what I wanted to wrap a packet of it around me. So the swift swirling river tempted me till someone said: "Don't. Only last month a priest was caught in the undertow and never seen again." Being pig-headed, I laughed and dived boldly. At once I was gripped by an angry current and swept downstream. I struggled frantically, feeling childishly helpless. I thought I was done for, but by a desperate effort I edged inshore about a mile further down.

Hanging on to a sweeper that whipped the water, I was so happy I recked little of my plight. Yet it was a sorry one, naked in that mosquito-misty bush. All the way back to camp they attacked me in swarms and I beat them off with branches. As I arrived exhausted I wondered: "Inscrutable Providence! Why should a poor priest perish and a sinner like myself be saved?"

It was nice to be on the boat churning down the muddy current.

It was restful and easy-going. More or less the passengers were interesting. Indeed, most people are if you probe them a little. I tried a bit of Somerset Maugham technique on them, turning them into stories I was too lazy to write.

For instance, the Government had an idea the Indians might be made to farm, and to teach them were sending in two agents and an ox. The head agent had been a preacher; his assistant was a war veteran. Already the two disliked each other, while their respective wives were spitting fire. Behold a setting for a tragic story of Arctic antagonisms.

Also antagonistic were the Churchmen. We had on board two priests and two Episcopalian missionaries. Each couple regarded the other with studied politeness and on Sunday held separate services at opposite ends of the boat. When I told these people the intention of my journey they seemed rather appalled. One of the priests, an ideal shepherd of the Wild with a long silvery beard, warned me almost with emotion: "Whatever you do, don't go alone. To travel by oneself in the Arctic is to court death. I know, because I've lived here all my life. A single slip and you are lost." I took his words jauntily. Up to now my plans had been vague. I had thought to get guides for the worst of the way, but to drift down rivers by myself. There was no credit in doing the trip with a party, and to be alone was fascinatingly foolhardy. I was airily confident, eager enough to be a fool.

At Smith's Landing our boat trip came to an end. A series of rapids made the river impossible to navigate, so the cargo had to be carried over a twenty-mile portage to Fort Smith, where we took another steamer. These Hudson's Bay posts are pretty much alike, built of logs on a high bluff overlooking the river. They form three sides of a square, with small and frequent windows so that they can be defended from Indian attack. Not that there was much risk, as the natives in these parts are hardly of the fighting kind. However, when we reached Fort Simpson we found it in a ferment of excitement.

On the way up we had been hearing rumours of hostility and possible insurrection. It was really rather absurd, but the wives of the two agents took it seriously. In fact, they talked of returning in the boat. I don't think they were scared of the red men; it was probably funk in the face of a winter of exile. And the reason for all the trouble was that placid and comfortable beast, our ox OSCAR.

Now Oscar and I were particular pals, and with my preference for animals over humans I would often ride in his barge and keep him company. He seemed to appreciate my society, gazing at me with his big, calm eyes. I caressed, groomed and fed him, loving

his bovine odour. So when we beached at Fort Simpson and Oscar was landed, it was I who led him ashore. Then I had a bright idea—let me mount on his back and ride him into the village in triumph. What a sight for the poor Indians! Almost like a circus. They should receive me with acclamation.

But I was sadly deceived. Instead of with rejoicing, I was met by sour silence. In grim groups the Indians gathered, gazing at me with frowning faces. In nasty knots they scowled and gloomed. Their hostility was so marked I abandoned Oscar, but even then I could see I was regarded with rancour. As I approached one of the groups and hailed them in Chinook every man turned his back on me.

"Perhaps it's the way I'm dressed," I muttered; for I was wearing high boots, a khaki costume and a cowboy hat. "Maybe they take me for one of the Mounted Police. Evidently they have bad consciences and don't care for the Mounties. . . ." But, no, they seemed friendly enough with the trooper who accosted them, though it might have been the spell of his scarlet tunic. Me they regarded as an enemy. . . . Why?

Then I found out. It seemed they considered me a minion of the Government that was going to make them slaves of the soil. Oscar was a symbol of agricultural serfdom. True, he might be brother to the wood bison that roamed their solitudes, but they, like the bison, were wild and free. And they were going to remain that way. The white man wanted to seize their lands and make farmers of them. He would trap them like wood bison and turn them into Oscars. . . . No, they did not want to be civilized. They were warriors, slayers of the bear and the wolf. No truck gardens and Oscars for them.

And the traders supported them, maybe egged them on. They did not want the Indians other than procurers of fur. They wanted to buy skins from them, not grain. It was their game to keep the native wild and free. This Government bug that the North might be made to yield harvests and the red man harnessed to the plough was all hooley. The North was a wilderness, hopeless, barren. It would never be any good except to shelter the savage and the brute. And behold, I was the fall guy who bore the brunt of Indian animosity. They identified *me* with the attempt to enslave them. It was all so silly; yet they were like children, and all the time I was at Simpson I gave them a wide berth. Even as I roamed the woods I had a feeling of being stalked. It got so that I finally gave up the land and took to the water.

This was partly because I became the possessor of the finest birch-bark canoe in the North. I bought it at Great Slave Lake from an

old Indian who was considered the best canoe-maker of his tribe. He judged it his masterpiece and truly it was like a flame upon the water. A gaudy patchwork of purple, scarlet, primrose and silver, it danced on the ripple as lightly as a leaf. The old man sighed as he parted with it. He had gone far to select the bark. He had sewn it with wood fibre and lashed it with willow wands. There was not a nut nor a nail anywhere. It had taken him a year to fashion, and now he looked at it with the sadness of an artist who sees his finest work being sold. With reluctance he took the twenty-five dollars I offered him.

So now, far from the sullen Indians who wanted to pot me in the back, I darted up and down the river in my fairy canoe. It was as nervous as a thoroughbred, but I soon mastered it, swaying to its rhythm and feeling as if it were part of me. I was confident that nothing could upset me, and nothing ever did. Even in the most riotous rapids it rode exultantly. I christened it *Coquette*, and to the admiration of at least myself I demonstrated its qualities.

There was another, however, who shared my enthusiasm. He was an amateur explorer who aimed to become a real one. He had made some minor expeditions, but now he proposed to cross from the Mackenzie to Hudson Bay. He had only a vague idea of the route and was depending on the Eskimos to help him. He would winter in the interior, taking two years to cross the continent. I do not think his purpose was scientific. Rather, he was pushed by the idea of exalting himself in his own eyes, if not in those of the public. He was young, rich, handsome, eager to make a bid for fame. He had a big canoe with supplies for a year, and a guide who was both water-wise and wood-wise. He was sure of success as he told me his plans, but somehow I felt he was not the man for the part.

One day he invited me to lunch in his cabin, and we were smoking afterwards when a silky field mouse ran across the floor. "Let's play football with it," he cried, and with his moccasined feet began to kick it around the room. "Let the poor thing go," I said; at which he was surprised, for I think he was insensitive to animal suffering. I had also been told he was inconsiderate to the natives and had accepted presents from the Eskimos without giving anything in return.

I remember the morning he started out. The day was sunny and serene, and the canoe was deep in the water. The explorer looked glum and subdued. I think he was scared at the thought of the job he had undertaken. I accompanied them a little way in *Coquette*, and as I waved a final farewell I felt a sudden sympathy for him. Sadly I watched his canoe dwindle to a speck in the distance. There! he was off on a two-thousand-mile trip into the unknown. For two years that was the last heard of him. Then news filtered out that



two white men had been murdered by natives. It was said the explorer had kicked an Eskimo who had promptly spitted him with a spear. I remembered the mouse and was not surprised. There was something arrogant and tactless in him. It was a pity, though; for the tribe also slew his companion, who was one of the best guides in the North.

At last we left Fort Simpson and embarked on the mighty MacKenzie. I am not going into details of our trip, but I enjoyed every moment of it. Nothing is more delightful than a river voyage, for it is easy, intimate, varied and safe. We visited a score of forts and met many Factors who hailed from the Hebrides. Highlandmen make the best officers of the Company, because they are hardy, used to loneliness and good traders. It is a saturnine life that takes men of determined sanity to endure it. These Hudson's Bay posts were a mine for the story-teller, but the grim men who manned them had no sense of the romance of destiny.

Fascinating books have been written on this trip. I made copious notes, intending to add another volume to the list, but other events crowded on me and I never got round to it. Imaginative work ousted mere reportage of the Wild. However, isolated incidents stand out. I remember a landing in the grey dawn, where three men were huddled over a tiny fire, eating breakfast of fried bacon. One was an old Scotch guide who was reckoned tough even in a land where most are inured to hardship. The second was a tall Englishman with a monocle. Straight and slim he stood, sipping his coffee that steamed in the eager air. He spoke with a soft voice and a nonchalant drawl. "Just come out of the Barren Lands," he said casually. "Went in after musk ox. . . . No, didn't bag a single head. The other chaps had all the luck. . . . But I'm going in again and hope to do better."

I marvelled a little. Here was a man of high society, son of an earl, who preferred to rough it in the wilds. He was blue-eyed and blond, with the look of a viking. He said he liked the life and had no desire to return to England. I had suspected the explorer of swank, but this man was innocent of it. No fear of him boring you at the club or writing a book about his exploits.

The third of the party was a thin little man with a wiry beard. He was called Hornby and was a relative of the famous Lancashire cricketer. He had spent many winters in the shadow of the Pole and was an authority on the Coppermine country. Several years later he went in with two lads and all three perished in the wilderness. One of the boys left a diary which is a most poignant human document. It is published in the Penguin Library under the title of *Unflinching*.

One day an Indian came to the Post to tell us that a cabin belonging to two trappers had been closed for a month or more. The men had not been seen, but an evil odour was coming from it. An investigation seemed advisable, so we set out in two canoes. There was a captain of the Mounties, a sergeant, two troopers and several others. We saw the cabin from far off, situated on a high bluff. In its very stillness there was something sinister. As we approached we were met by an appalling stench. It seemed to grip us by the throat. I gagged and shuddered, for the odour was of decaying human flesh.

The door was bolted, but the sergeant and a trooper picked up a log and charged it. At the third assault it caved in. Immediately a black cloud like smoke poured forth. But it was a seething cloud composed of thousands of big blue-bottle flies. There in the gaudy sunshine they trumpeted their freedom. There was something obscene about them, they were so bloated and greasy. We watched them pour forth and spread into the clean, sweet air. Only when the cloud thinned did we advance. Then half suffocated by the stench I peeped into the cabin.

Everything was tidy, even clean, but in the gloom at the rear I saw a sight that made my flesh creep. On two bunks, one over the other, two men were lying. Yet it was hard to tell they were human beings, for heaping over them were hills of greasy husks that had once been the homes of maggots. All that was visible of them were their hands and faces. They had skeleton hands, dimly seen through parchment-like skin. Their faces were skulls covered with the same oily integument. Beneath the caved-in mask that had been their faces countless maggots could be seen crawling and feeding.

In the case of both men the skull had been smashed in, and jagged bone showed brain cavities cleaned by the crawling worm. The grinning skulls were pillowed in cushions of rank hair of a foul ashen colour. The hair had continued to grow after their death till it was now a foot long. Their beards, too, had grown till, like some vile fungus, their chests were matted with horrible hair. Then, looking closer, I saw that this hair was in constant movement, agitated like the long grass of a prairie. I could not understand this undulation till I saw it was caused by legions of lice moving in endless activity round the hair roots. There in that jungle of rancid hair armies of lice were fighting, feasting, breeding in an obscene world of their own.

On the lower bed lay a rifle and in it one discharged shell. Another empty shell lay on the floor. Evidently the two men had been killed by these cartridges, their skulls being shattered at close range. Near the bunk was a small notebook with a glazed cover. It was partly an account book, partly an irregular diary. There were

entries regarding pelts and their prices, also stores and their costs. But its main interest was the human one. There was evidence of early dissension between the writer and his partner, developing into hate and finally into murderous resolution. Here are some of the entries:

Spud gets more peevish every day. Seems I've picked a punk for a partner. We're just beginning the winter. If I could quit I would.

Again:

We are snapping at one another like crazy curs. Nothing seems to please Spud. He's trying to pick a row with me, but I won't give him a chance. Wish this winter was over.

Later:

Spud gets more and more cranky. I believe he hates me. I think he would like to kill me. I must watch out for him.

A week later:

We are no more on speaking terms. To-day he walked round the table rather than ask me to pass the sugar. He makes me afraid, staring at me with his big, glassy eyes.

Again:

I'm afraid Spud is going mad. I'm feared for my life. I can't sleep nights thinking he'll knife me in the dark. We each cook our own meals now.

Then an entry in a nervous, shaky hand:

We had a bloody fight. He got hold of this diary and tried to read it. We wrestled for it. I got it back, but we had a hellish scrap. Now he wants a chance to kill me. Well, I must get him first.

Then:

Have decided to kill Spud. Will blow out his brains with my rifle.

A last entry, almost indecipherable:

Have killed poor Spud. He was sleeping and would never know. Now I must kill myself. Curse this cruel land! It drives us crazy. God forgive me. Good-bye, folks. . . .

"It's the old story," said the sergeant. "One of them guys goes nuts, croaks his partner, then does himself in. It's tough on us, though. We've got to bury the bastards."

We were nearing the mouth of the muddy Mackenzie. I was not sorry. The river had grown so wide that from one bank the other was dim on the horizon. The shores were clay, rising to levels of

tundra with low hills in the far distance. A ghastly, God-forsaken land. Our company had grown small and we were inclined to bore one another. Nevertheless, the trip had been enjoyable and comes back to me in vivid memories. For instance:

The Grand Falls of the Athabasca when I caught a queer fish in the pool below the cascade. I don't know what it was, but "it didn't taste so good." Also as I fished I saw a scow coming over the falls. It tilted so I thought it was going to somersault. I sure hand it out to that pilot. . . .

The long wait at Fort Smith, where, regardless of superstition, the Engineer shot a pelican. He also painted his canoe scarlet. It was so pretty in its ginger-bread gloss, but he had to have it a tomato colour. . . .

Posts where we lingered for days in leisured unloading, after a preliminary night of poker and booze. We were so welcome it was hard to refuse to celebrate. Many of the Factors were a little queer, for it was not easy to live that life and remain normal. Only a routine of order and discipline saved them. Once they lost their grip they were done. . . .

The feeling of the vast valley of the Mackenzie and of the few men who roamed and ruled it. There was only a score of them, yet they were as well known as if they lived in a village. Stefansson was the uncrowned king of the Arctic, but the others were fearless, hardy, tried and true. Nearly all met tragic deaths. The Mackenzie was more murderous than the Yukon. Its law was harder, its tribute higher. It killed most of those I knew.

Fort Macpherson stood on a high bluff overlooking the junction of the Mackenzie and the Peel. It was just like other posts, only more important. The Factor was an old man called John North who had spent his life in the service of the Company. He was a rare character with a pretty perception of writing. I say this because he had read some of my books. . . . Egregious vanity of an author! In any case the patriarchal white beard suggested sagacity, and, judging by the many half-breeds in sight, fecundity. He sold me sacks of flour and sides of bacon and gave me good advice. It was mostly: "Don't. Don't go on. Go back the way you came, like a good little boy."

Another pessimist was the officer of the Mounties. "Don't you do it," he said. "Just think of the Lost Patrol." I did think of it and was impressed. Every winter a police force of three made the cross-country trip to the Yukon and back. It was a notable achievement, calling for skill and stamina. But the last party had failed to reach Dawson and an expedition had been sent in search of them.

"A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," said the sergeant, leaving me to infer that one of the party had fallen sick and let the others down. I think he expected me to reconstruct the tragedy in verse; but I never like to write about realities, so the Ballad of the Lost Patrol was left unperpetrated.

On the flat near the river a tribe of Eskimos were camped, and I set up my tent among them. They were semi-civilized, for they had gramophones that played hymns and they punished their children. I saw one urchin being chastised. The mother held his hand as with a strip of whalebone she pounded his palm. It reminded me of my own boyhood, but I never howled so lustily as that kid.

I became friendly with the Chief, who was an artist, and squatted in his tent where we looked at one another, trying not to feel fools. If he had been educated we could have sat on the terrace of the Café du Dôme and talked art. Humorously we sketched each other. Then he gave me a fish-hook of walrus ivory, and I gave him my safety razor. I reckoned if I was going to blaze a trail to the Yukon I would be more in character with a beard.

As time went on I worried more and more about my coming trip. In a few days the steamer would start south, severing my last link with civilization. It would be so easy to step on board again and take the easy way out. Everyone urged me to, but I thought: If you do it you'll never respect yourself again. As a trail-blazer you'll be a chunk of cheese. So with a sense of destiny I watched the boat pull out. I bade farewell to friends who looked at me with mournful eyes, as if they never expected to see me again. Well, that was that. I was doomed to get out the hard way or spend the winter in the Arctic.

In these disconsolate days my canoe was small comfort to me. There it lay on the mud, a streak of primrose and crimson. Beside it lay a kayak of one-man size. It belonged to the son of the chief and he sadly wanted to swap it for *Coquette*. We would dart about on the river, he in the canoe, I in the kayak. I was tempted to take his offer, for it would have been unique to cross the Rockies with such a craft. But it was tippy and could not have held enough grub for the trip.

So there I was, stranded on the beach with no hope of getting away. My first idea had been to get Indians to go with me as far as the Divide and from there shove off on my own. It would be all downstream, on rivers easy to navigate. That I would be alone pleased me mightily. That there was considerable possibility of me perishing did not occur to me. But I found the Indians would not carry my canoe to headwaters. The distance was over a hundred miles and the trail almost impassable. It was doubtful if the frail craft could

stand the trip. Though I offered to pay them their winter's rations, they steadfastly refused. Thus I learned that in the North money could not buy everything.

What to do? Everyone discouraged me, and it seemed I was up a blind alley. I was planning to spend the next nine months in the Arctic when an unbelievable bit of luck happened to me.

## Chapter Three

### THE RAT RIVER

ONE day while loafing on the beach with my friends the Eskimos I saw a scow come up the river. Two men were sculling while a woman squatted in the stern. As they drew near I went to meet them. One man was big, with a fiery beard and a bold belly. The other was small, with a grey bristle. A poke bonnet and Mother Hubbard could not conceal the woman's comeliness.

"I'm Captain McTosh," said the big man, "of the gallant craft *Ophelia*, en route for Dawson."

"Not in that thing," I gasped.

"Don't disparage *Ophelia*. She's going to be the first scow to cross the Rockies. How would you like to sign on as her crew?"

"Okay with me," I said; so there and then it was arranged I was to share the effort and the expense. Hurrah! I thought; soon I will be back in my little cabin, my troubles over. Little did I dream they were about to begin.

I quickly got to know them. The mate of the *Ophelia* was the rat-grey little man. His name was Jake Skilly. "I'm a trapper," he told me. "Mac's a lousy trader. You can tell it by his guts."

"Now, Jake," said the Lady who was Mrs. McTosh, "don't be mean. Ever since we left you've done nothing but grizzle."

"I'm not sayin' a word agin you, ma'am. You're the finest little woman in the Arctic."

"Considering I'm the only one. You know, I came north on our honeymoon," she told me. "I thought it would be romantic, but I don't know. . . . McTosh, being Scotch, took a honeymoon trip by himself just before he married me. He went right round the world, gave himself a grand time. But wait till I get Outside. Won't I make things sparkle?"

I guessed she would, too. She was a lively one, as pretty as she was peppy. With resignation and a copy of Shakespeare she had followed her red-haired Romeo into the wilderness. "I can quote the bard by the yard," she said. "We read him through the Long Night. We decided to take one book and concentrate on it. Well, I'm going out to make up for a lot of loneliness."

She certainly deserved a good time. I could see them cooped in their cabin through the weary winter, reading William by the light of a seal-oil lamp. A tough part for a woman to play, but she was made of rare stuff.

"McTosh is a free trader," she said, "and hates the Company. He won't visit the post on the hill, and nothing would make him set foot on their steamer. Hence *Ophelia*."

Jake was a wiry, wizened man with a perpetual frown. He, too, hated the Company, and for no price would he sell them a pelt. He was one of half a dozen white men who thought nothing of going off alone into the winter wild, of building an ice house in the blizzard, of living on raw fish so rotten he poked a hole in the skin and sucked out the substance. He boasted that he and Stefansson were the only two who could live off the land. He had trap-lines on the Mackenzie Delta and his pack of white fox ran into hundreds of skins.

These were to be my companions for many days, and as I set out with them my heart was gay. The Eskimos crowded down to see us off. I had Jake with me in the canoe, while in the scow were the trader and his wife, with two Indians to help. At last I was on my way, and this time it was going to be the real thing.

Paddling up the Peel River was serenely monotonous. Mud banks mounted to stark grey tundra as the stream wound wearily through desolation. Yet toward evening we came on a glittering pool. I got out my line and the spoon had hardly touched the water when it was seized by a huge fish. In a few minutes the canoe was alive with scaly monsters. Pulling them in became so tedious we went ashore and made a meal. They had little flavour; their flesh was soft and I left most of my catch on the bank. They were what were known as "coneyes." That is the only place I ever saw them.

Toward evening we came to the mouth of the Rat River and there made camp. As it was one of many similar camps, I had better describe it. While we put up the tents the Lady prepared supper. Jake built the fire, whittling a bit of dry driftwood, then nursing the tiny flame into a blaze by adding chips of increasing size. After which he would fetch the water and set the kettle to boil. Meantime the Lady had opened the flour sack and poured into it a small pan of water in which some yeast cakes had been dissolved. She let the water be absorbed by the flour, mixing it into a paste which she moulded into bannocks. These she fried in bacon fat, at the same time cooking two strips of bacon for each of us. Then she brewed the tea and told us supper was served.

This was our usual meal, sometimes augmented by blueberries which she stewed slightly and sprinkled sparingly with sugar. We



had neither beans, rice nor canned food of any kind. So for over six weeks I lived on bannocks, bacon, blueberries and *bohea* and never worked harder nor felt better.

I always loved to put up my tiny tent. At Fort Resolution I had swapped my big blanket for a rabbit's-foot robe. This was made of skin taken from the legs of rabbits and woven into a loose texture. It was thick, fluffy and very light, an ideal covering for the country. Many a night I blessed it. Snuggled in it, with beneath me my slicker and waterproof dunnage bag, I was so cosy I laughed for sheer joy.

After breakfast, a repetition of supper, we started up the Rat River. At the mouth it was hardly fifty feet wide. Willows overhung the water and the air was heavy. Mists of mosquitoes rose to meet us, but we were prepared. Over our hats we wore nets that fell to the shoulder, while our gloves were of the gauntlet type. Thus equipped, though they buzzed round us in clouds, we could laugh at them. The mosquito is the scourge of the region. Even when eating it was necessary to wear a net. At Fort Norman I once walked in the woods with the Engineer. He was a few paces in front when I said: "I didn't notice you were wearing a grey jumper." "It's bright blue," he laughed. And in truth he was so sheathed with a film of mosquitoes you would have sworn his back was grey. But here on the Rat River they attained their greatest density. To show a bit of bare flesh was to be set on ferociously. No citronella lotions deterred them. We drank our tea under our veils and the dregs in our cups often consisted of drowned insects.

The lower reaches of the Rat were a series of deep pools and long stretches of still water. All of the first day the canoe leapt eagerly forward, but towards evening there were signs of change. As the river rose to hilly land the water became sprightly. It danced and sparkled, it was merry and mocking. By these tokens we knew our days of placid paddling were over. And sure enough next morning we ran into rough stuff. After buffeting it a bit we were obliged to give up and load *Coquette* on the scow. From then on we had to fight every inch of the way.

And now a word as to my canoe comrade. He was a cigarette fiend of the most desperate brand. He smoked all through meals, and if I awoke at night I would see a tiny glow coming from his tent, so that I imagined he smoked in his sleep. As we paddled upstream he would ask me to hang on to a branch while he rolled a fresh cigarette. This happened every fifteen minutes. He made his cigarette from plug tobacco, cut with his jack-knife, rolling it in a half-page of an old magazine. With avidity he inhaled the strong

smoke deep into his lungs. If he went ten minutes without a "coffin nail" a wild look came into his eyes and he trembled violently. It was as if his nervous system depended on tobacco.

He had a cadaverous face that made me think of a wolf. But he was a fine type of the Arctic adventurer. What stories he could tell! . . . Of winters when he relied for food on fish caught through a hole in the ice; of months of darkness and silence when he was forced to eat his dog; of days spent in an ice house in the heart of a blizzard. . . . What yarns the man could spin of starvation, cold, loneliness. He told them simply, casually and without self-pity.

The only time he showed bitterness was when he spoke of his father. The old man had been a disciplinarian, and when Jake told of his juvenile pants being warmed his face was convulsed with wrath. All the hardships of his life left him unmoved, but these boyish beltings were something he could never forget. Now his dad had died, leaving him two thousand dollars, and he was going out to claim it; but what he would have liked more would have been to lambast the old man's hide for the drubbings he had received.

There were six of us on the scow and the water was mean. It showed white teeth, resenting our invasion. *Ophelia* weighed half a ton, so it was going to be a tough job to take her up this angry flood. At first we poled hopefully, making good progress. Then the bushy banks gave way to gravel bars and the water grew shallow. Even with four poles we found it difficult to advance. Ruefully it was decided to begin what must be our chief means of navigation—tracking.

Then it was I began to realize what I had let myself in for. We were to haul this hulk up to the Divide and over to the other side. It was grotesque, incredible. I had imagined I would use my canoe for most of the trip, and here I was roped in to do a job that would have made a Volga boatman look like a slacker. But it was too late to draw back, so I thought of my old maxim: "If you have to do a thing you hate like hell to do, do it for all you're damn well worth."

With apprehension I watched McTosh uncoil a hundred feet of rope from *Ophelia's* hold and line it along the bank. With distaste I saw him attach smaller ropes with rolled sacks to fit one's shoulders. With dismay I saw him indicate a particular harness and ask me if it were to my liking. If you had demanded of a galley slave if his oar was to his fancy he would have replied with more enthusiasm.

And henceforth my rôle was to be that of a yoke-ox and a beaver, with the working capacity of both. Why did I not take that boat out? For in all my life I never worked so hard as I did in the next few weeks. As I tugged, strained, plunged knee-deep in water, panted and lunged forward in my sling of sacking, I muttered: "What a bloody fool you are! Why do you do those things? And you are

*paying* for the privilege." Well, I suppose it was for the good of my soul, and if I had not done it I would not have been able to write about it to-day.

Fortunately the water was tepid, and as long as the stream was not waist-high it was a pleasure to wade. I cut off my trousers at the knee and slit my boots at the ankle, so that the water could gush in and out. I tried wearing moccasins, but they slipped on the smooth boulders and were worn out in two days. My high boots with nailed soles were just the thing. They gripped the rock so that I was able to put my guts into the pull. And I did. I determined that none of the others would put it over on me. In my effort to play the game maybe I exaggerated, but I do not think I ever let myself down.

It was a great life, twelve hours a day on the tow-line and most of the time in the water. For one thing, it cured me of corns that had bothered me for years. One day I took off my boots and stared at feet so immaculate I was lost in admiration. And since then they have remained innocent of bunions and other blemishes. If only the rest of my carcass was as worthy of approbation as my feet I might hope to be a movie star.

Twelve hours a day on the track-line! . . . True, we had spells off every three hours, when we would throw ourselves exhausted on a gravel bar, make a fire and have some grub. We needed it. While the Lady fried her bannock, the water drooled from our mouths. As I watched her cook I kept swallowing my saliva and wishing there was twice as much grub. But in that case I could not have thrown myself into the water and heaved like a Volga boatman. Those Russians must have been foxing, I thought. At least they could sing. For us there was no thought of vocalism. We hoarded our breath for angry water.

I don't like the phrase "borrowed time." Do we not all live on it, more or less? Who has not had half a dozen close calls? We brush shoulders with death every day and do not know it. It takes a narrow shave to make us realize how precarious is existence. On the Rat River I had one of these. We had sculled up a deep pool between two canyon walls, with a rock jutting at its upper end. Beyond was a run of white water. It was waist-deep and the bottom was paved with round boulders. Jake was poling *Ophelia*, keeping her head to the current. Four of us were on the track-line, bent low, our chests breasting the current. It was the toughest pull we had ever had. With muscles taut we inched the scow upstream, fighting every step. Often we would be motionless, just holding our own.

I was bent almost double in the foam, when suddenly I was

jerked off my feet. Between me and the sky was a wall of water. I was being dragged downstream, my back bumping over the boulders. I was utterly helpless, with over me a slab of seething foam like a coffin lid. Good-bye, world, I thought. . . . Would the bumping never cease? . . . Then suddenly it did, and McTosh was fishing me out more dead than alive. I was hauled to the gravel bar, where they worked over me. My back felt broken, my bones too, but a slug of brandy brought me round. Said McTosh: "What a grand headline in the papers you've gone and spoiled. *Yukon Bard Meets Watery Doom.*" I thought his levity was ill-timed. I appreciated more the ministrations of his Lady, who made a fuss over me with sympathy and hot tea.

What had happened was that Jake's pole had slipped, letting the scow slew sideways to the current. As *Ophelia* swung downstream he lost control of her. Being at the end of the track-line, I was thrown more violently than the others, and dragged under. I completely disappeared, so that they could only stare with horror at my watery grave. But they had not reckoned with that rock so providentially placed at the mouth of the canyon. The scow struck it and stuck there long enough for Jake to get control. Undoubtedly that snag of stone saved my life. Otherwise I would have been dragged into deep water and drowned in a few moments. We did not go any further that day. I was weak and wild-headed; but after a night of rest I took my place once more on the track-line.

And indeed I was needed. In the struggle before us everyone was called on to give of his best. Even the Lady lashed herself to the straining rope, pulling like a little man. We were launched on a bold adventure and the river was doing its best to balk us. The idea, it seemed to say, of trying to take a scow over the Rockies! It had never been done, never would be done.

As we plunged and panted, our eyes were fixed on the muddle of mountains ahead. They seemed impossible to pass; yet as we strained upward a path opened for us. It's like Life, I thought banally. Difficulties daunt us, but if we tackle them with a high heart barriers break down and the way is clear.

Let me describe a typical scene. . . . We have come to where the valley opens out, and the river forks in a dozen channels. We select the likeliest stream and explore it. It is only a few inches deep and studded with boulders. How I curse that unwieldy scow! How I hate these fur men and their stubbornness! Why couldn't they have a stout canoe for the job? Blast and damn *Ophelia*! Well, we will have to get the old bitch over somehow. So first we unload her and portage the stuff half a mile. It takes several hours packing everything through the thick brush. Then we proceed to boost her over

the boulders, scraping her bottom all the way. At one place we deepen the channel, at another build a wing dam. Often we have to get under the scow and heft her on.

Though there are five of us, it is a heart-breaking job to hoist her foot by foot over that rocky bed. Heart-breaking, too, to see mile after mile of the same gravel ahead of us. But, oh, what joy when we come on a channel deep enough to float us a little! And again, what despair when we see another devastating reach of rock and rubble!

There were days when we made only half a mile after weary efforts through a dozen hours. But luckily the weather was lovely and the water warm. One did not mind being in it for ten hours a day. In other circumstances I might have worried about catching a chill, but I never felt better. I gave no further thought to bewailing my lot; my only idea was to extricate myself. So I laboured to the limit and kept grinning even when things were grim. A dauntless smile, I thought, is worth a million dollars. I put up a big bluff as if I were playing a lusty game and enjoying it.

I did enjoy some of it too—squatting on a sand bar and swallowing my spittle as I watched the bannock bake; smoking my after-supper pipe and retiring to my tent, where I would dig a hole to set my hip-bone and sleep like a hound after a hunt. As I dozed off, I would see the glow of Jake's cigarette in his tent and hear the McToshes love-making in theirs. Lucky devil, McTosh, I thought; and I knew Jake thought so too.

As we climbed higher, the mountains closed around us and the river narrowed to a single channel. But it forked at one point, so that we were in doubt which was the main stream. Though we took the branch that carried the biggest bulk of water, we were uneasy. It should lead us to a little lake at the height of the Divide. To miss that lake would be disaster.

It took so little to cheer me in those direful days. As we toiled upward we saw a high hill with a face of black soil. The stream ran bang into this and was diverted by it. But what gave me a pleasure as intense as it was simple was that the water which up to now had been obscure suddenly became crystal clear. It seemed to make such a difference to one's morale ploughing up a current that was pure and sparkling after weeks of wading in a murky stream.

One day the Indians announced that they were quitting. It was a bitter blow, but there was nothing to do about it. The leader said he had to get home to the christening of his baby boy, while the other professed to be the godfather. Of course, I knew they were sick of the grilling toil, and grimly I suspected that as guides they had lost their way. They wanted to leave us before we found them out.

So we let them go, and with evident joy they departed. For Indians they had worked hard, but they had never seemed contented. The job had been harder than they had bargained for. As I watched them moving swiftly downstream, taking short cuts and soon disappearing in the distance, I figured it would take them three days to travel the distance it had taken us three weeks to cover.

Their desertion made our travail ever so much harder, and to make matters worse we were losing heart. Day after day it became more difficult to keep the grin on my face as the fear grew on me that we were not on the right stream. But so far no one dared echo my doubt. Then one afternoon, after an unusually discouraging day, we flung ourselves on a sandspit for a cup of tea. As we gazed upward the stream narrowed and the valley looked as if it led to nowhere. McTosh was grim.

"Looks like we're lost. Well, if we come to a blind alley we can only go back till we find the right fork and try again."

The others glumly agreed, but I felt less stout-hearted. My spirit rebelled. If nothing would make him abandon his damned scow I was determined I would not help him to lug it over any more mountains. I would desert them. Alone I would make my way back to Macpherson. In *Coquette* I could make good time.

We were too downhearted to go any further that day and decided to make camp. Our supper was passed in silence; but after we had finished our bannocks and tea, to get away from the others I went for a stroll upstream. I thought I would climb a tree, after the manner of the Indians, and try to see ahead. I selected a promising pine on a grassy bank and was preparing to scale it when I observed that the bark had been blazed by an axe. To my amazement I saw that on the white surface was faintly pencilled a name. I made it out—BUFFALO JONES. So that well-known character had passed here on his way to the Klondike, for behold his endorsement on the tree trunk.

Of course, I had to announce my good news in the most casual way, as if it were scarcely worth mentioning. But the others rose to instant excitement and made me take them to the tree. I was mighty glad I had not suggested leaving them, and that night I slept better than I had done since the Indians deserted us. Indeed, so elated was I by my discovery that for the next week my exertions were herculean. No one hefted *Ophelia* more enthusiastically than I, and as I helped to heave her upstream I almost liked her. For I had a vision of myself in my Dawson cabin, swinging in my hammock, with the river gleaming blue and the birds singing. Oh, how I would rest and read and sleep! No more wandering for little Willie. But to the others I posed as their saviour.

"You were about to turn back," I gibed. "I was prepared to go

on despite all hell. But for my exploring spirit you would have rotted away the winter with the snot-nosed Eskimos."

With these words I put my entire guts into the job and let no one beat me to it. And there was need, for the way was the worst yet. The stream narrowed to a brook, then a ditch overgrown with willows. Suddenly we realized we were on the height of land forming the Divide. We were no longer climbing. We were pushing on the level. We were pulling over a small prairie. . . .

And Glory be! there in the near distance was a small lake, shining like a jewel under the cold blue sky.

## Chapter Four

### THE BELL RIVER

THAT was a great moment. I felt as if it almost repaid me for the privation I had undergone. There was the lake about a mile away, and beyond it the Pass, wild and savage, the stark mountains looking as if they were cast of iron. Yet how to reach the lake was a problem. Luckily half the distance was dry tundra and fairly level, so once more we unloaded the cargo and emptied the scow. Then, using the four poles and the mast for rails and skids, we pushed it forward. In places we were able to use the poles as rollers, so that foot by foot we worked *Ophelia* nearer the glacial waters.

When we reached the true tundra progress was easier. There was water and squashy mud through which we were able to slither our old ark, but half the time we would be waist-deep in icy slime. Niggerheads promised a footing, then wobbled under our weight. However, they aided us, till at last the ground grew so swampy we were able to go on board and pole the rest of the way. So after ten weary hours of labour our craft splashed into a sudden depth of clear, cold water.

But we still had to return for our cargo. Although it was late it was broad daylight, and we decided to finish the job that night. I made three trips carrying my flour and bacon, trying to make stepping-stones of the niggerheads and failing because they wiggled under my weight. A hundred times I sank to my waist in the intervening mud and struggled up again. This was doubly hard with a sixty-pound sack of flour on my back. Sometimes I thought my heart would burst with the effort, and despite the chill air I was soaked with sweat.

But the fourth trip was the worst, for this time I had to pack my canoe. True, it did not weigh any more than a sack of flour, but it was much harder to balance. I carried it in the Indian way, with the paddles crossed as a back brace and a sling from the thwarts to make a band round my head. Thus fixed it was easy packing on the level, but in the muskeg it was hell. Time after time I had to throw it down and rest till my strength came back. Well, after an hour of that I reached the water's edge, and wasn't I glad to launch it on the smooth surface?



The little lake was clear and still. It reflected the sky coldly. Looking down, I saw strange Arctic weeds, and half expected to see some primeval monster rise up and grab for me. These secret waters made me shudder; but it was so good to be in the canoe again that, despite my exhaustion, I began to sing. Now, I thought, it will be easy going; and I blessed this gem of a lake that fathered streams flowing into the valley of the Mackenzie and the watershed of the Yukon.

It was a weird camp at the height of the Divide, with the midnight sun shining like a great red ball. There were sudden squalls of pelting rain, and the loneliness had a sinister quality that struck fear in me. The little lake shuddered as it shone. One had an "end of the world" feeling, as if this was the final word in desolation. As I looked at these iron mountains towering above the Pass I felt crushed with awe.

Having need of tent posts, I went to cut some saplings, but all I could find was a tiny tree about four feet high. As thick as my thigh at the butt, it tapered to a tip when it reached my chest. It was gnarled and grizzled, with sparse, tough leafage. I swung my axe vigorously, but the blade bounded back. It was as if I had struck a chunk of rubber with a croquet mallet. Again and again I swung, but the axe refused to make the faintest indentation in that horny trunk. A keen blade when I started, its edge now turned in disgust. That tiny tree seemed just the toughest thing on earth. Then I realized that it was very, very old, maybe a hundred years. It was a triumph of life over extinction. This pigmy pine was a symbol of the cruelty and frustration of the Arctic. It should have been three hundred feet high—a glorious, a majestic tree. I bowed before its brave defiance and craved its pardon for having planned an assault on its life.

So weary were we, we remained at that camp a whole day. During the night hail hammered on our tents and mine collapsed under the onslaught. But there were no mosquitoes, so I used it as a covering. What a wretched night of cold and bitter wind, a weird red sun looking down on us with a bleary, dissipated eye!

I could not sleep, mainly because I worried about the stream that was to take us down to the Yukon. I could see no sign of it and the thought that we had been deceived made me sick. However, scouting round in the early morning, I saw a fringe of willows at the far end of the little plateau, and found it concealed a deep gully at the bottom of which brawled a lusty torrent.

"What a bonnie wee burn," said McTosh, all eagerness to launch *Ophelia*. So for the last time I got under her bottom and hefted for all I was worth. We tried to let her down by a rope; but I must admit I did not hang on very hard, and it was with a vicious joy

I saw her break away and crash through embattled willows to the foaming water.

I followed with my canoe and a happy heart. As I embarked on that babbling brook I was singing a song about Maggie and when she and I were young. And for the next three hours I kept singing over and over that refrain, but alas! mechanically, and no longer with joy. For the trip down that "bonnie wee burn" was a bit of hell. The waters that came down at Lodore were a ripple to it.

Fortunately, my canoe was well balanced and ballasted. My two sacks of flour and my dunnage bag were stowed amidships and everything was snug. Nevertheless, at moments I thought I would be upset. The water seemed to seize *Coquette* with a giant hand and shake her as a terrier does a rat. It descended in a series of rapids varied by small cascades, so that often, waist deep in foam, I was forced to get out and line the canoe. Once I was dragged after it into a deep pool and had to swim. At other times I thought my frail craft would be smashed like an egg-shell. Sometimes it would be gripped by fang-like boulders and held clear out of the water. Often it tilted till the water came over the thwarts, but always it righted itself. I fought desperately to steer and clear it, for I was alone now and realized what it would mean if I upset and lost my grub. And all the time, through seething cauldrons and whirling pools, with clenched teeth, I never ceased to sing of Maggie and the old mill stream.

Well, it was over at last. Just as I was beginning to despair, I saw a stretch of smooth water and knew I had reached the river that was to carry me the next stage of my journey. And on a grassy bank I found *Ophelia*. The party were exhausted, having had even a worse time than I. The men were grim, surly and sopping wet. I think they resented the absence of my help. They listened without sympathy as I related my woes on that rampageous river. It was then I took a definite dislike to them.

When things were bad I had been humble, but now the way seemed clear I felt independent. McTosh had left his belly on the Rat River and was inclined to be chesty about it. He and Jake were at loggerheads—the cause, the Lady. To this day I have never decided whether Mrs. McTosh was beautiful or not. I never saw her without her poke bonnet and Mother Hubbard, but I prefer to conserve the illusion that she was as lovely as she was charming. Anyway, Jake thought so, and was for ever fussing around her in a way that would have made any husband an understudy for Othello.

Another reason for their bickering was that Jake, with the money coming to him by his father's death, wanted to set up a trading post. True, it would be a few hundred miles from their territory, but even

at that distance it would hurt their trade. Also, with the idea of bucking the Company, he talked of cutting prices. The others protested, but with bitter rancour he vowed he would get even with a certain Factor who, he declared, had refused to sell him flour when he was starving.

However, the chief reason why Jake was so cantankerous was that he had been obliged to cut down his smoking. He had only three magazines left and he looked at them anxiously. Paper was precious to him. It meant cigarettes, the chief need of his existence. . . .

This was the state of affairs when I hauled *Coquette* on the bank and emptied a few gallons of water out of her. None of my food was spoiled; the flour had caked on the outside of the sacks, keeping it dry: while my dunnage bag was so well waterproofed my clothes were not even damp. But the canoe had been badly strained and was leaking at many of the seams. I spent two hours doctoring it. This was done with resin chewed in the mouth and applied to the leak. I went over every seam, inch by inch, sucking vigorously. If I drew in any air I plastered gum over the place till suction was no longer possible. The gum soon hardened and the mend was made. I liked this job so much that I often wished my canoe would leak so that I could show my skill in repairing it.

The others, however, had fared worse than I. The scow had been strained in the torrent and the boards had sprung so that it was half full of water. Their precious bales of fur were wet and were now drying on the bank. So they decided to draw *Ophelia* out of the river, up-end her and caulk the seams of her bottom. I felt no desire to give them a hand. McTosh loved her like a father, but I hated her with the venom of the bitter days I had spent heaving her over the Summit.

To a lesser degree Jake shared my dislike. He looked longingly at my canoe. He was an expert paddle man and he loved its lightness and grace. He envied me when I announced my intention of shoving off on my own. For I had now decided to carry out my first plan and travel alone for the rest of the trip. Otherwise there would be no sport in it. Of course I knew I was taking a risk. A sprained ankle would mean helplessness. Loss of grub would be starvation. A dozen accidents could happen, and if one was alone the results might be fatal. I do not wish to exaggerate the risks I was taking, but they were obvious even to my jaunty spirit.

Behold me, then, light-heartedly launched on the bosom of the Bell River. I wanted to call it *la belle rivière*, for of all I have known it was the most beautiful. Perhaps I thought this because of its contrast with the vicious little stream from which I had just escaped. From turbulence I swept to tranquillity. Imagine a river about

seventy yards in width, with a surface as smooth as a mirror, and a gentle, placid current confined in banks of verdant green. It was nowhere deeper than six feet, and so crystal clear I could distinguish every pebble on the bottom. An idyllic stream, worthy of Arcadia.

And along its banks were fur and feather of Arcadian innocence. All the ptarmigan of the region must have come here to nest. Every few yards sat a mother with her chicks. They were brown, not like the snow-white birds I had hitherto seen. And beyond them in the low bush were myriads of rabbits. They, too, were russet brown, but with the coming of the snow they would turn white and I would know them as the Arctic hare. Thus Nature took care of her children. And as if I were a bear and not interested in them they were unafraid of me. I could have knocked them over with my paddle, for they scarce troubled to get out of my way. But I had neither time nor taste for killing. Anyway, I thought that at that season they must be pretty tough.

And fish! I never saw so many fish. If I peered into that pellucid water I could see them nose to the current, weaving and wavering in shoals. Indeed, in some places, against a bed of silver gravel, they made a mosaic of light and shade. But I did not try to catch them. It was too easy. A flick of my rod and I had one. Five minutes and I had a fry fit for a family. However, they were soft of flesh and flat of flavour. I preferred my rusty bacon; for I had such a craving for fat I could have eaten tallow.

So day after day I drifted dreamily, under a cloudless sky in an air that was gentle and warm as a caress. Sometimes I wished for a book of poems, and often I would lie at full length in the canoe and let the current bear me along. The banks were rounded with sward and I knew there were no rapids. My mind was at peace because I had no thought of danger. What could harm me here in this sylvan solitude? I had lots of grub—bannocks, bacon, blueberries. I made my pots of tea on the bank whenever I felt bored, and at night I chose a grove for my tent. The ground would be dry and fragrant with crushed pine cones. Sometimes before supper I would have a swim. It was glorious to be alone like that.

And I was really, truly alone. I felt that if I had drawn a hundred-mile circle around me there would not have been a human soul in its compass. As I hugged my fire of an evening I gloated over my solitude. As I dawdled downstream I felt so free and careless I was in no hurry for company. After two hundred miles of the Bell I would come on the Porcupine, but I was in no rush to reach it. I wanted this beautiful stream to unwind for ever.

Once as I went to fill my billy from a pool I got a glimpse of a stranger in its clear mirror. I saw a brown, bearded creature in an old khaki shirt cut off at the shoulders and hanging in rags. His

pants had been hacked off at the knees and were also in shreds. His legs and arms were brown and bare. What a savage! Then I laughed with delight, for the stranger was myself. I was lean as a rake, with a waist that caved in so that I could almost span it with my hands. I christened that country the Land of Lean Bellies, for a paunch there was unthinkable. Not even a modest melon.

I rarely used my paddle, and one evening I was drifting lazily when in the far distance I thought I saw something moving up the bank. I was always on the lookout for bear, so I put some shells in my Remington and set it in readiness. But as I drew near I discerned two objects moving dark against the shingle. To my great excitement I made out they were men. Who could they be? Rarely did human beings come to this wild place. This river was but a frail scratch on the map. Then I saw they were poling a canoe upstream.

Our surprise was mutual and they greeted me with joy. They were tall men, bronzed, bearded and tough as whalebone. They had been prospecting all summer and were going up the Bell to trap through the winter. Having been away from civilization for two years, they wanted the news. But the first thing they asked was: "What was the result of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons prize fight?" Of all world events, that was to them the most vital. So late by the camp-fire we smoked and yarned, and early next morning they left me.

In placid peace for days and days I drifted down my river of dreams. Most of my dreams were of Dawson, my cabin and the work I planned to do. On the Mackenzie I had gathered a lot of material that was different. As I paddled I mulled over this and saw ballads in the making. How I longed to get at them!

Then the river changed. It spraddled out with many a sand bar where I had to step into the suave stream and ease off the canoe. I went bare-legged, for mosquitoes were no longer in evidence. And I watched eagerly for my first sight of the Porcupine. It must be near now. The banks were a tangle of driftwood, blanched and weathered, so that making a fire was the work of a moment. Ever so often I would run *Coquette* on a sandspit and boil a billy of tea. Strong, sweet, stimulating, it never seemed so good.

Then one day I saw ahead the broad flow of the river that was to carry me on the next stage of my journey. Instead of green the water was olive brown. I was greatly elated and dug my paddle into it, singing joyously as I went. The current was stronger, and when the wind rose there were little waves. In places the river was several hundred yards wide, so that when the breeze blew upstream it kept me humping.

Then the weather worsened and there were cloud bursts, when I would make a dash for the nearest bank and get my tent up. It only took two minutes to make the canvas taut, but by that time the torrent would be drumming down. However, inside I would be dry and warm, and I would immediately go to sleep. There were two days of rain during which I kept to the tent sleeping most of the time. I blessed the cosy comfort of my rabbits' foot robe and wondered how the crew of the *Ophelia* were getting along.

One day passing the mouth of a small stream I was attracted by a domelike hill of many colours. It was a little way inland and I was curious to have a closer look, so I beached *Coquette* and strode up the creek. I had not gone far when I saw a mother goose with six young ones. They were almost full grown, but lacked their pin feathers and could not rise from the ground. They made a frantic effort to reach the water, but I barred the way with my paddle and laid four of them low. They must have been very fragile, for light blows killed them instantly. Then the mother and two of her brood reached the water where they found safety in swimming.

Rather ruefully I laid my four geese on the bank. I had killed them in the excitement of the moment and now I regretted it. I could eat one, or maybe two, but four was beyond me. So as I went to climb that prismatic hill I was feeling rather glum. How could I cook my goose? To fry it in the pan would be difficult. Could I not roast it or bake it in ashes?

I reached the foot of the hill that looked dovelike in the evening light. It made me think of a sacred mount in its sweet serenity. Its surface was composed of a spongy moss of many colours, rose, orange, lemon, pomegranate. I gained the top and in a hollow in that fungous-like growth, I lay down and went to sleep. I had no fear of night falling, for there was no night. No one would steal *Coquette*. There on the beach she lay, friendly, willing, patient. And alongside her lay my four geese. . . .

I woke with a start. I must have slept for hours. For a moment I wondered where I was, then I looked down and saw my canoe. But a man was standing beside it, and with a feeling of alarm I went plunging downhill, going up to my knees with every leap in the spongy moss.

## Chapter Five

### THE PORCUPINE

AS I drew nearer, to my great relief I saw that it was Jake. He was sitting on *Coquette*, gazing grimly at my geese. A little way down the bank was *Ophelia*, hitched to a trunk. McTosh was making camp, while the Lady was preparing tea. I was mighty glad to see them again. I was fed up with loneliness, and my conscience had troubled me for my desertion of them. Now we would have a happy reunion. I would welcome them with my geese. Four people, four geese. The Lady would cook them in her big pot, and we would each eat one.

Our greetings were cordial yet casual. It might have been yesterday we parted instead of two weeks before. I found them the worse for wear and sensed things were not going well. It was the Lady who enlightened me. "It's Jake. He's just the crankiest thing, worrying about his cigarette paper. He's only got one *Argosy* left, and when that's done he says he'll go nuts. I'm glad we caught up with you. Maybe it'll change his ideas some."

We all fell to plucking the geese and boiled them in the 'big enamelled pail. They were cased in fat and so tender the flesh seemed to melt in the mouth. As I wolfed down delicious morsels I had less regret for slaughtering them.

We were gorged and gladsome when a sudden squall came up and we had to rush to the tents to avoid getting drenched. All day we were prisoned on that beach by heavy rain. Jake and McTosh had a furious row. The Captain wanted to go on, but Jake refused. He was very surly and looked livid and fleshless. His jaw muscles jerked nervously; his fingers twitched in the gesture of rolling a cigarette. He had cut himself down to one an hour now and was taking it hard. You could see he lived for the moment he could twist his magazine paper round his shredded tobacco and light up. Then his whole being would light up too, and he would be almost genial again. Otherwise he and McTosh were snarling at each other like two malamutes over a mildewed bone.

Next day Jake took me aside. "Let me go with you," he begged. "I can't stand that carroty son-of-a-bitch a day longer. If it wasn't for the little woman I'd have slugged him before now. If I go with

him I may do it yet. Curse him, I hate his guts!" This could be taken literally, for the Trader had got back his belly again, yet lost none of the arrogance its absence had evoked. However, nothing could have justified Jake's bitterness as he launched into a stream of profanity that made me wonder if he was sane. I did not like his suggestion to take him with me, but I said I would consider it. The question was whether the McTosh couple could handle the scow alone. Jake insisted:

"They'll be all right. From now on the river's easy. They can go to sleep and the current will take them right down to Fort Yukon." I demurred, but next day the Lady came to me rather pleadingly. "I wish you'd let Jake go with you. I'm afraid of him and McTosh coming to blows. It's all I can do to keep them from mixing it. Besides, he has only enough paper for three days and you can make better time in the canoe. You can wait for us at Rampart. . . . Why can't he smoke a pipe like all decent men? I can't understand it. His God-damn cigarette is the only way he can get satisfaction. Believe me, that guy's nuts."

This seemed a cheerful reason for wishing him on me, but she was so worried I finally agreed. Immediately an atmosphere of relief settled down on the party. We picked the bones of the goslings and parted on the best of terms. As Jake took his place in the stern of *Coquette* he looked almost amiable. Beside him lay the solitary *Argosy* that represented the last of his paper. I looked at it anxiously as page by page it went up in smoke. Well, in three days we should be at Rampart, the trading post on the Porcupine, and there he would get all the paper he wanted.

We took the river at a swift lick and I cursed my partner who kept me humping to keep up with him. After so much dawdling it seemed tough to be obliged to sweat again. With vicious rage I dug into the water and the banks slipped by as never before. What with the current and our spirited paddling it seemed to me we must be making ten miles an hour. I would have rebelled, but my eyes kept roving to that solitary magazine.

"How many pages left, Jake?" I asked.

"About thirty," he told me gloomily.

I made a rapid calculation. Allowing twenty-four smokes a day, that gave us only two and a half days. Hum! I put more guts into my stroke. As I sat crissped in the bow I could hear his grating voice: "I think I oughta warn you, partner, if this paper pans out I'm liable to go bughouse."

"Nice cheerful prospect," I said. "And then what?"

"Well, ye mind that yarn ye told me of them two stiffs ye found in a cabin wi' their heads ablowed off? . . . I've jest been athinkin'



that's what might happen to you an' me—if this here paper gives out." I laughed as at a merry jest, but as time went on I did not think it so funny. A homicidal maniac in the making is not the most pleasant of companions. I got to watching him more and more, and my nervousness increased. And that night he told me: "Ye know, I always figgered if I run outa paper for cigarettes I'd be a fit candysate for the loony ward. Well, I'll tell ye what happened to me the winter I ate my dog. . . . A wolverine got into the cabin and chewed all my paper to pulp. I was just about to go daffy when I found the Bible my old mother gave me. I hated my dad, but I sure did like Ma. I carried that there Bible everywhere. I never read it, but jest liked to have it by me, thinkin' it might come in useful. Well, it did—mighty useful. For I smoked it through from Genesis to Revelation. Damn poor smokin' at that, but it saved my life. Yes, sir, that Bible saved me from a bullet in my bean."

As I listened I was sorry I had no Bible to offer him. With growing alarm I watched that paper diminish. If only he would confine his smoking to the day; but at night when I woke up I could see the glow of his cigarette. In despair I paddled harder than ever. Thank Heaven! the Post by my reckoning was only a day away. I counted every hour. Then on the third morning I saw he was down to his last sheets.

Anxiously I looked ahead as I rounded each bend of the river. My arms and back were aching, but I had no thought of letting up. I felt we must make Rampart that day or there would be hell to pay. I begged Jake to go easy on his smokes, and he seemed to realize the crisis. He tried to get a grip on himself. But, oh, how he made that water churn! Then suddenly I felt like shouting with joy. We had not stopped for chow and it must have been late in the afternoon when we swung round a bend and there, a mile ahead, I saw the high bluffs of Rampart.

But what was the matter? An Indian woman stood on the landing beach and she was wildly waving us off. As we drew near she cried: "You no stop. All Injun heap sick. You catchum too. You go away much quick."

"But what the hell?" began Jake, when we saw two men coming down the path at a run. They also waved us to keep out. Both were white men, and one was big and burly.

"Don't come ashore," he cried. "We have smallpox at the Post. Yes, *smallpox*. Got it bad. All the Indians down with it. I'm the Doctor. Wait . . . I'll write you a note to say you haven't landed." He scribbled on a piece of paper and gave it to me. "There! That'll show you didn't go ashore. Otherwise you would be put in quarantine. You'd better get on your way and be careful to avoid any

Indians you meet on the banks. Now I must hurry back. Have a hundred patients to look after."

He was going, when he turned again. "There's a launch on the way up with supplies. We've run out of vaccine. You might tell them to hurry. . . . Oh, and by the way, you wouldn't care to stay and give us a hand, would you?" To my eternal shame I excused myself. The thought of all that putridity revolted me. Yet here was a chance of making a real hero of myself. To volunteer to nurse in a smallpox camp—what a fine gesture! Well, I just hadn't the gizzard for it.

So I said I guessed I'd go on and wished him good luck. Then I started paddling downstream when I was aware of an uncomfortable silence behind me. Jake was not paddling. Instead he was looking at me with a glare of murderous hate.

"What's biting you?" I asked.

"The cigarette paper," he snarled. "Look! That's all I've got—two sheets. I wish I'd gone ashore with them guys."

"And maybe meet your death from smallpox."

"It's not smallpox I'm scared of. It's myself. When this paper's done I'll go screwy."

"It's not too late. I'll put you ashore. But you'll have to spend a month in quarantine."

"No, go on," he said sullenly. "There's that launch coming up. I'll take a chance on that. But look out for yourself. I'm not responsible any more." So we paddled more furiously than ever: but we did not speak and I felt the tension between us was near to breaking-point. Jake reduced his cigarettes to a minimum and used his paper parsimoniously. Yet even at that I saw that the end was approaching. I dreaded the crazy man behind me so much that I kept my loaded rifle in front of me. Then I heard him sneer: "Seems to me you're all fixed up to fire that there gun of yours."

"Might see a bear on the bank," I answered with affected carelessness.

He laughed harshly. "I've got an axe here might be useful if we saw . . . a bear. I'm a good man at throwin' an axe." No doubt he could get me with the axe before I could swing round with the rifle. Nice messy end to a misspent existence! As I bent to the paddle I felt my spine creep. The man was unbalanced, but whether to the point of insanity or not I could not determine. It is true he was a nicotine fiend and his nerves were sustained by tobacco. And only strong cigarettes could satisfy his craving. He loathed a pipe. Once when I handed him mine he returned it with repugnance.

And incidentally, lest it be thought that I exaggerate in my fear that my partner was going crazy, let me say that that was what ulti-

mately happened. A few years later, in his lonely cabin on the Arctic Ocean, Jake went mad and shot off the top of his head.

That night after supper he suddenly demanded: "Gimme that bit o' paper the Doc gave you."

"What do you want to do with it?"

"Make a cigarette. Maybe two."

"No. It's going to save us a heap of trouble when we get to civilization. I won't give it up." I thought he was going to spring at me and prepared to yield the paper rather than fight for it. But he contented himself by cursing me and my ancestors, and over the camp-fire kept baiting me with the foulest abuse. In the end, however, he retired to his tent, taking the axe with him.

All that night I lay awake with my rifle ready to my hand. If he made any move to attack I was prepared to shoot. I would aim for his legs, I thought. But the night passed and he made no move. There was not even the usual cigarette glow from his tent. I was afraid now he might draw his throat across the axe blade. I felt anxious. So I rose early and called him, but he would not answer. I made breakfast with bacon and hot tea and called him again. This time he got up. I felt sorry for him, he looked so shrunken and abject. He refused to eat or drink.

"Look here, Jake," I said; "let's go on for another half day. We ought to meet that launch. If we don't I'll give you the Doc's paper and we can go back to the smallpox camp." His face brightened. He seemed a new man. He gulped down some strong tea and even tried my pipe. "Till noon," he stipulated.

It was about eleven when the canoe sprung a leak and I had to beach it. I was stooping over it on a gravel bar, sucking the seams, when I looked up and saw a tiny launch swinging round the bend. Was I glad? Oh, boy! I hailed it, but Jake was before me. With a bound he was on board and a moment later he was drawing on a cigarette as if it had saved his life. From then on he was a changed man. He could not do enough for me. He insisted on performing all the chores of the camp, and in the evening, with his jack-knife, he carved me a tiny model of a rabbit snare. It was his way of making friends again. We talked as if nothing had marred our harmony, and everything went as merry as a church chime.

It never rains but it pours; for next morning we were gaily paddling around a bend when we almost butted into a small stern-wheel steamer. As we materialized from out of the blue a score of eyes were on us. At the sight of *Coquette*, dancing daintily on the wave, there were shouts of admiration. She was as gay and colourful as when I first bought her. Now she shot forward with an air of saucy

triumph. So far as I was concerned it was her last dashing gesture and I tried to make it as dramatic as possible. . . .

A dozen people were regarding the shapely craft as its owner, a bronzed and bearded individual, leapt lightly ashore. He looked like a scarecrow spewed out of the wild, with tattered pants hacked off at the knee and a khaki shirt cut clean at the shoulders. Lean as a greyhound, sinewy as a panther he . . .

So I pictured myself, and truly I enjoyed the thrill of that moment—those wondering eyes on me, my sheer primitiveness as in my proud rags I strode up the gang-plank. I felt nonchalant, yet arrogant. The Captain, very trim in white duck, met me halfway.

"I'm Captain Brown from Fairbanks."

"I'm from Edmonton," I said. There was a gasp from the crowd. "My partner's from Baffin Land," I added. Another gasp, then the Captain said: "You don't mean to say you've brought that canoe all the way?"

"Pretty near. But I'm not figgering on going much further with it. I'm fixing on taking a passage with you." He looked doubtfully at me, so I went on rapidly: "I'll give you a cheque on Dawson for the passage of myself and my friend."

"It's not that," he said. "We hear there's smallpox at Rampart. You've not stopped there by any chance?"

I handed him the paper from the Doctor. He read it very carefully. "All right," he said at last. "But if you hadn't had this clearance I wouldn't have taken you. I admit we were scared. I was going to Rampart when I heard of the epidemic, so I turned back. Unfortunately I struck a snag in the river and knocked a hole in the boat. We're trying to patch it up now by wedging sacks of flour in it."

"Lucky for me you struck that snag," I said, "for I've had enough of paddling for the rest of my life."

It was a long, sleepy trip up the Yukon and I spent it mainly in eating. At first the food made me sick, but I soon got over that. From the table I went to my sunny stateroom and stretched on my berth, thinking with a sigh of ecstasy that my wanderings were over for a month of moons. I gained six pounds on the trip, but was still lance-lean. I shaved off my beard and grinned at the hollow mug that confronted me. I borrowed a guitar from the steward and composed a song that the deckhands learned and sang for years after. It was called: *When the Ice-worms Nest Again*.

Jake made one sheepish and awkward appearance in the cabin, then vanished into the steerage which seemed more to his taste. Once or twice I got a glimpse of him yarning with the deckhands, and I knew he spent hours playing cards with the stewards.

Then just before we reached Dawson he came to me looking very humble.

"I want the loan of a hundred dollars," he said. "I've lost five hundred in black-jack down below and pledged my furs in payment. I'll need some money when I get to town—enough to last me till I draw the dough the old man left me. I sure have made a bloody fool of myself."

Next time I saw him he repaid me my money and told me he had a job as a bar-tender. He had received his heritage and was very chesty about it. I told him to keep out of card games, but I guess my advice fell on deaf ears. He was a born gambler and a reckless one.

Six months later I met him and he was very abject. He had gambled away all his capital and was heading for the Arctic again. I offered him another loan, but he refused, saying he could not repay me. So he went away to trap and starve and suffer, and in the end to blow out his foolish brains.

## Chapter Six

### HOME, SWEET HOME

WE reached Dawson at eleven in the evening and I immediately went ashore. What joy to see again that little sleeping town! With a sort of ecstasy I walked the old familiar streets. Ramshackle and unsightly they might be, but to me they were beautiful. I loved them, for I had known so much happiness there. Down Front Street and up Main I wandered in the midnight daylight, meeting not a soul and wondering at my infatuation for this old burg. It felt like home to me and I was glad to be back.

I went into a pub and saw three men I knew. After the clean hardness of the men of the Wild they seemed greasy and grubby. They gazed at me strangely and with some suspicion. I looked like a tough character, one who might hold them up. I had to tell them who I was, and even then they hesitated to believe me. With the stamp of the Wild on me I felt a contempt for these men of the town. After a drink or two I went back to the boat. Next morning I had a gorgeous time introducing myself to so many old friends. "You're so thin," they remarked.

"So would you be," I answered, "if you had to live for three months on blueberries and pea-vine roots."

"Where did you come from?" they would ask. And I would reply with elaborate casualness: "Oh, I just dropped in from Edmonton." Then I would brag of the greatness of the Mackenzie Valley as compared to the Yukon. They were impressed. Here standards of the North prevailed, and the man from the Arctic strutted it over the man from the subarctic. So I swaggered round feeling pleased with myself; but as, after a week, no one took any more notice of me, I settled down to be an everyday Dawsonite. At first I was inclined to regret the sacrifice of my beard, but it made me look like a Rabbi. And besides, there were girls in the offing.

The first morning I went ashore and climbed the hill to my cabin. It had such a pathetic, deserted look, as if it had missed me. Now it seemed to welcome me again, and its moose horns over the porch were like arms stretched out to me. As I unlocked the door I thought I saw my own ghost on the threshold. I caressed the rude walls

and the rough furniture and loved them. I made the bed with two thick blankets and my rabbits' foot robe. Here, said I, is my haven and here I rest till the spirit moves me to mush on.

It seems queer to me now. . . . I was able to live in a fine room in a *de luxe* hotel in any city in the world, and yet I just wanted my bare cabin in this near-ghost town. I wanted the winter to clamp down on me and shut me off from the world outside. Again I would be a hermit, living my own life in my own way. Oh, I know I was looked on as a strange individual, morose and unsocial; but to be solitary was not uncommon in the North. And I was of the North, its lover, its living voice. Dawson was my home; I had no thought of ever deserting it.

Such was my attitude as with exultant happiness I settled down to months of simple living. Once more I would supremely belong to myself. So I had the cabin re-papered and the stove revised. It was very bright and warm *chez moi*. I got books from the library, a good guitar and a bath-tub. Twice a day I would take a cold bath and so harden myself. All my life, even in the Arctic, I have never worn underclothes. The prickly sensation of my childish woollens is with me still.

So I resumed the old beloved habits, my rising around noon, my lunch of ham and eggs, raspberry pie and coffee. In the bakery of the old Norwegian I relaxed, and generally had a gang of sourdoughs round my table. Truly life was very agreeable, just as I wanted it to be. I kept at the peak of physical fitness and beat out my snowshoe trails in the woods and on the hills. It was on these solitary tramps I began to work again, spinning my fancies as I walked, and in the silence of my cabin converting them into words. Just as my first inspiration had been Kipling and my second the Ancient Mariner, now I was influenced by Bret Harte and Eugene Field. My material was uniquely my own, so that I might be forgiven for modelling myself on others. I had definitely abandoned the Yukon and my new work concerned the Mackenzie basin and the Arctic.

I used to write on the coarse rolls of paper used by paper-hangers, pinning them on the wall and printing my verses in big charcoal letters. Then I would pace back and forth before them, studying them, repeating them, trying to make them perfect. I wanted them to appeal to the eye as well as to the ear. I tried to avoid any literary quality. Verse, not poetry, is what I was after—something the man in the street would take notice of and the sweet old lady would paste in her album; something the schoolboy would spout and the fellow in a pub would quote. Yet I never wrote to please anyone but myself; it just happened I belonged to the simple folks whom I liked to please.

So all that winter I worked at my book of verse; not too hard

nor too anxiously, for I had lots of time and knew it would come out all right. My first book had been written with no thought of publication; my second was a *tour de force* produced in the small hours of the morning; but this one was a leisured and pleasant job spread over most of a year. For I was enjoying my winter too much to make it a strenuous one of work. Even in the coldest days I climbed to the summit of the Dome and returned to have my bath in freezing water. Sometimes, indeed, it consisted of rubbing myself with chunks of ice. I practised physical culture till my muscles rippled, and often I would go off for days on a tramp up the creeks. And it was on one of those trips I met with an adventure that inclined me to believe in a Special Providence.



## Chapter Seven

### LOST IN THE WILD

ONE morning, feeling a restless foot, I started out for Gold Run. The distance was nigh on fifty miles, but with bright weather and a crisp trail I thought nothing of that. I had an Indian lope I could keep up for hours. I ran in-toes and bent forward, with a swing movement of the arms. It was as if one was tumbling and checking oneself.

I reached the roadhouse that night, not too tired to visit some friends. On the following morning I decided to walk back, but thought I would take another trail. In a parka and moccasins I was in fine fettle. Soon I came to where the trail forked, and I took what seemed to be the likeliest branch. But I made a bad guess, for it got smaller as it went through the woods and finally petered out.

I had gone a mile out of my way; yet little troubled I turned and regained the right trail. It was in the open. The sun was brilliant, the cold about thirty below, the air like champagne. I was plumbful of pep, so I ran till I came to another fork in the trail. I took the left-hand branch as it seemed to head more directly for town. I had not loped along very far when I found the path led up to the mountains. I could see it streaking miles ahead to where stood a big roadhouse. I made for this, thinking to get my directions and maybe have lunch; but when I reached it I found it had long since been abandoned. I swithered whether to turn or go a little further. To beat back on my tracks would have meant another night in Gold Run. The trail was so good I thought I would venture on. Maybe I would strike a lone cabin in the waste.

Yet the trail kept ever climbing and I saw no sign of life. I was abysmally alone in a dazzling white wilderness. Even then I could have turned back, but I had that obstinacy that makes one loathe to admit one is beaten. Besides, a Northman hates to give up a trail. I was feeling gloriously well, for I had climbed higher than I had imagined, and below me lay a white immensity of awe-inspiring desolation. So I turned again to the upward trail, convinced that I was foolish, but saying: "I'll go just a little further. Maybe beyond the next ridge I'll come on life." That was the temptation,

ridge succeeding ridge and the hope that the next might reveal human habitation. Indeed, I might still have retraced my steps when some miles further on I saw in the diamond clarity a tiny cabin. It was remoter than I thought, and when I gained it to my dismay it was empty.

I was now committed to this trail. There was no returning. I must go wherever it led. I kept climbing higher and higher into the hills which now closed behind me shutting out the valley. I had a trapped feeling but hurried on. What worried me was that the path dwindled so rapidly. It became a toe-track that switched from ridge to ridge but ever mounting. Little by little it grew fainter, till at last it failed. In front of me was virgin snow, and I found I was breaking trail. Then at last I realized I was lost.

In tense moments I always sing, and now I found myself crooning *The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond*. As I did so I thought of that long-past day when I had walked the length of Loch Lomond in the rain. Since then I had followed so many strange trails and this might be the last. Night was coming on. If it caught me before I found shelter it would be hard to survive till dawn. So I ploughed ahead; for, though the snow had effaced it, there were still signs of the trail below. Sometimes the drift was knee-high, and then again it had been blown away revealing the hard track. All I could do was to follow it blindly. "By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes," I chanted as I stumbled on. Often the snow was up to my knees and I had to lift my legs high or flounder in the drift. Once I did, falling forward on my face, and strange to say I did not want to rise. I said: "It's lovely to rest a little in this white shroud," but the last word made me jerk upright. Not for a moment must I linger. To do so would be drowsiness, sleep, death. Already I could feel an almost invincible desire to close my eyes. . . . Just a short doze. . . . Fiercely I struggled against it then goaded myself on again.

I sang no longer. It was a fight with the Wild, a fight to the death. A nice end to a promising career. Frozen in the snow. Might be weeks before they found me up here in this huddle of peaks. Pity about that book. I might never see it published. On, on again. Never give up. . . . I saw the sun set like an angry boil, when suddenly I heard a scuffling in the snow, and up the steep bank sprang a bull moose. For a moment it stood huge and majestic against the setting sun. Then it vanished, leaving me wondering if I had dreamed.

Again I staggered on, fighting fatigue and refusing to quench my thirst with snow. That would have been fatal. I had not eaten since early morn but I did not think of hunger now. Indeed I did not

think at all. I was on the verge of collapse and all I felt was the physical desire to lie down and rest and rest. . . . Then suddenly as I was about to give up, my second strength came to me. In a state almost resembling delirium I pressed desperately on.

I saw night fall, shadows obscure the trail; but I realized they were the shadows of pine. I had descended to the timber belt and the woods were all about me. In a kind of stupor I went on and on. Thank heaven, the snow was lighter under the trees; not much longer could I have kept up that plunging through the deep drifts. In a dull daze I saw that the moon was in the sky, shining down with a merciless clarity. The cold had grown intense; it must be forty-five below. Then in a flash of vision I knew it would be fatal to stumble on. I must find a tree and walk round and round it till morning; otherwise I would stagger into a snow bank and be lost for good. So I selected a big pine and began to beat down the snow at its base. Round this I must turn and turn all night, and the night was eighteen hours long. My chances of survival were pretty slim, but still I must fight on.

How long I turned around that tree I cannot tell. Perhaps thousands of times. At first I tried to count, then gave up. My feet rose and fell, my eyes closed, but I plodded my circle on that now hard-beaten snow. Strange thoughts came to me . . . "By yon bonnie banks and by yon bonnie braes" . . . I suppose I'll never see old Scotland again. . . . Darned shame to finish like this. I might have done such good work. . . . I think I'll just rest my back against the tree. . . . No, no, struggle on, you fool! Fight to the last. . . .

The moon seemed unnaturally bright. It was shining down on me in pity. Damn you, Moon! I don't want your pity. I've always been your lover and now you'll gleam over my snow-cold corpse. I, dreamer, joyous liver of life, so grateful for all good things, will lie white under the silver of your spell. . . . My legs were giving under me. Through the frosted collar of my parka I could see the diamond glitter of the moon.

There comes a time when the spirit can no longer conquer the flesh, when despite the gallant heart the foot fails. This came to me now. My muscles refused to function, my legs crumpled beneath me. I sank on my knees, rose and sank again. And as I kneeled there in the attitude of prayer my Special Providence came to my aid. Or was it the moon that saved me? For it seemed to burn brighter, brighter. It seemed to cry to me: "Look! Look!" And in answer to the pleading of the moon I looked, and there in the shadow of the woods across a brief gully I saw . . . A CABIN.

I wondered—could it be? Or was it only a mirage, a ghost cabin, born of wistful thinking? I peered harder. No, it was beginning to

take definite shape in that weird glamour. I never saw the moon make such an effort of brightness, and it now revealed the cabin clear as day in the silver glade. It was like a glimpse of heaven, and again I feared a cruel illusion. But it persisted, and at last I was convinced it was a reality. The cabin was there, had been there all the time. For hours and hours I had been tramping miles and miles around this pine with safety only a hundred yards away. . . .

Now I must be careful. If I fell into a drift I was so weak I could never struggle out. So almost on hands and knees I worked my way to the cabin. There was a clearing in front. I rose and stumbled on. Of course the cabin would be empty, but it would shelter me. I would build a fire, get warm, sleep. I was saved. Yet I had a frantic fear that the door might be locked. . . . But no—bless that old Yukon law, the latchstring was outside. I pulled it and tripping over the threshold I fell on the floor.

Thank God, the cabin was not deserted. Someone lived there, but no one rose to welcome me. Still, there was the stove, and (Oh, blessed Yukon law) a heap of kindlings. Trembling with joy I filled the stove and lit them into flame. I piled in small wood, then bigger, and soon the stove-pipe was glowing cherry red. What music as the flames roared up! How heavenly the heat! Cowering on the floor I let it soak into my hide.

Food! I must find something for I was ravenous. There was flour. No good. A can of beans! I hacked it open with my jack-knife and heated it on the stove. As soon as it was warm I wolfed them from the can. I wanted to make tea but I was too tired. There were two bunks at one end of the cabin and some tumbled blankets in the lower. So after fixing the stove that it would burn for hours, I crawled into the bunk, curled up in the heavy blankets and lost consciousness.

I was awakened by the smell of frying bacon. What a heavenly odour! I sniffed back to awareness and opened my eyes. A huge man was standing by the stove. He had a shock of snow-white hair and a long grey beard. He looked like a reprobate Apostle Peter. He was bleary-eyed, dirty, dishevelled, like a man who was at the tail end of a fierce jag.

"Hullo!" I said.

"Hullo, young feller; I thought you was never agone to rouse. Been sleepin' yer haid off. It's nigh noon. Musta been petered out when ye got here. Lucky ye found the cabin. Reckon ye was losted."

"Yes, I was just about all in."

"Musta taken the old trail over the mountain. Hain't been used for years. Pretty tough goin'. Well, now yer here I hope yer fixin' to stay a bit. I got lots o' grub. Just come from town where a

feller staked me. I'm puttin' down a shaft in the side of the mountain an' could do with a bit of help, so what?"

"I'm sorry. I'm going back to town. I work there."

"What might ye be workin' at?"

"I tap a typewriter."

"Sounds easy. One of them clurorks, I guess. Well, it takes all kinds of folks to make a world. I'm a hard-rock miner, name of Joe Rich. Helluva name to give a man that's been poor all his life. But I'll strike it yet. I'll die a millionaire. Have ye heard of me back in the old burg?" I seemed to have a vague remembrance of a man of his name. I could not recall its nature, but there was something sinister in it.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Are you well known there?"

"Well known . . . why, say! there ain't a girl in Lousetown don't know old Joe. I kin make things sparkle some. I'm seventy-three an' feel like a four-year-old. Say, I brought a box of eggs from town. What about hittin' you with a slab of hen-fruit?"

I was agreeable and we wolfed bacon and eggs. There was bread too. His hands were filthy, yet I did not seem to mind. I ate heartily, but best of all was the boiling tea. I felt grateful; however when he suggested I remain with him a few days I demurred. There was egg on his beard and his cabin was dirty. Weakly I told him I would remain there that night, yet even as I did so I had strange misgivings. Again that suggestion of something sinister came back to me.

After eating he suggested we visit his mine. It consisted of a hole in the ground ten feet across and six deep. I knew nothing about mineral rock so I listened as he talked of stringers and veins and the mother lode. He had it here, he said, if he could only go deep enough. "There's a fortune in that there hole. You can see it stickin' out—gold-bearin' quartz. I've just been to town havin' some of it analyzed an' it's rich. If I had only capital an' lots of help, I'd be a muckin' millionaire."

He had a profound voice and he roared in his enthusiasm. Then with a flying leap he landed in the middle of the hole. I marvelled at his agility when suddenly I saw his face turn to me with a look of alarm. He gave one gasp and staggered to the brim of the pit.

He was hanging on to the edge and about to collapse when I grabbed his arms. With all my strength I tried to hoist him up. He was a heavy man, but he managed to help me so that he was not all dead weight. Desperately he fought, gasping and gazing at me with frightened eyes. Finally, with an effort that strained my muscles to the limit, I got him on the level ground, and there he lay like one in a swoon. At last he roused. "That there mine near proved my grave. I shoulda thought before I jumped. Before I went

to town I made a big fire to thaw out the ground. That hole's full of gas. Mighta been asphyxiated. Reckon, buddy, you saved my life."

"Well, you saved mine, so we can shake on it."

"Better still, we'll go back to the cabin an' bloody well celebrate."

He produced a bottle of Scotch and we began to drink. We stoked up the stove, made ourselves comfortable and finished the bottle. He drank about four-fifths, I the remainder. Then he opened a second bottle. I retired, however, but he seemed to be keeping it up. I was roused by him gripping me by the shoulder and shaking me roughly. "Come on an' join me, partner. You're a hell of a sport to let a man drink alone." Reluctantly I rose and accepted a glass. He was pretty well tanked up by this time and he grew worse as the night went on. He yarned of his travels in Australia, South Africa, Bolivia. He had followed the gold lure all his life. I began to be interested, for the whisky was stimulating my mind. But there was one country of which he did not talk, the High North. He had tales about every other but this in which he lived. Again I racked my brain to discover what it was holding back about this unkempt old man.

Tired at last and only half sober, I threw myself on my bunk. Alone, he fell into a brooding silence broken by mutterings and lurid oaths. He was like an evil being, haunted by memories of past misdeeds. Suddenly I was aware of him shaking me more violently than before. "Get up, you damned little shrimp," he roared. "I want to talk to you." In a half daze I felt myself being hauled from the blankets and hurled into the only chair. There I slumped, wide-eyed and wondering. Was this man a maniac? If so I was out of luck. I seemed to have a specialty of encountering crazy characters, first that mannikin Jake, then this Colossus. He poised before me, his eyes burning, his face inflamed and distorted.

"I've a feelin' I wanna tell you somethin'. I've jes' gotto. I've never told it to a human soul so it's between us two. But if you ever blab, by the horns of Moses, I'll let the daylight through your hide." Menacingly he took a shot-gun from the wall. "Yes, I'll puncture your gizzard wi' buckshot till it looks like a colander."

"Please don't tell me," I faltered. "I don't want to know your secret."

"You've got to," he shouted, flourishing the gun. "I'm tired of bein' the only one to carry it round. If I tell it to you it'll help me, an' you look a nice guy."

"Well, go on," I said with resignation. "Spill it."

At that he threw down the gun and burst into a roar of laughter. "Kindo skeered ye, didn't I? Why, lad, I wouldn't hurt a rabbit. And that's what you look like, a skeered rabbit. 'Fraid I'll hurt ye. You think I'm a killer? Why, I never killed a man in my life an'

never will. But you know what they call me in the North? . . . *Cannibal Joe.*"

Then I remembered. It was the story of two prospectors in the Barren Lands. After a year one returned alone with a tale of hardship and starvation. They had been lost for months in the Winter Wild. They had used up their grub and been forced to live on the country. His partner had succumbed, but this man had struggled on and made his way to safety. It was a great story of an epic battle that should have left him an emaciated wreck. But curiously enough he looked well fed. Also the dog he brought back was well conditioned. It was strange. Then some Indians came in with a story of the corpse of a white man with the flesh cut away. All evidence pointed to it being the dead partner. Suspicions were roused. It was even hinted that the survivor had killed his mate and lived on him. It had happened before, and would happen again in that insensate North that turns men into brutes and lunatics. Well, here was the survivor himself, ready to tell his story . . . and I did not want to listen.

As I stared at him he had a fit of fury. He grabbed up the gun again. "You don't believe I ate Bob," he raved. "You don't think I'm a cannibal, Say you don't or I'll riddle your guts."

"I certainly don't," I said. "I'm sure you would never do such a thing. The idea!"

He subsided. "No, I wouldn't. I'd perish first. Bob was the best pal I ever had. We'd a died for one another. When he passed on it was a knock-out for me, but his last words showed he thought as much of me, for he whispers: 'Joe, if my dead corpse is any good to you, use it. You know what I mean. Don't hesitate; maybe I can be the means of savin' your life. So long, pard.' Them was his last words, so help me God. Well, I did use him. . . ." He paused, fixing me with his burning eyes. Suddenly he became like a crazy man. "Not that," he shrieked. "Not what you think. I never et Bob. I never et a single slice of him. No, that's not what I want to tell you. . . . What did I do? Listen—God curse me! I never et Bob, but *I fed him to the dogs and I et the bloody dogs.*" With that he collapsed on the floor and lay like a dead man.

When I woke in the morning there was my host standing by the fire frying eggs and bacon. He showed no sign of a hangover. With his white beard and snowy hair he was mild, almost gentle. He made me think of Walt Whitman.

After we had eaten he sped me on my way. He seemed glad to be rid of me now, and as we parted he remarked almost casually:

"Say, friend, if ye had a bad dream last night ye jest wanto ferget it. Y'understand?" I understood. And that is why I have forgotten . . . till now.

I FINISHED my book in the late spring, but still I lingered. Dawson had meant much to me and I had been happy there. I was loath to go, for I felt I would be leaving behind me part of myself. So I remained until the last boat. As I wrote some verses bidding good-bye to my cabin I knew they meant farewell to so much that was familiar and dear.

My plan was to go to the South Seas. I imagined I had the gift of golden indolence and suspected that as an adventurer I was a bit of baloney. I dreamed of palms, starry-eyed sirens, strumming ukuleles on coral strands. I could realize all that. I was young, free and I had no more need to work. I had done my share of roving. Let me rest in colourful security.

So I thought, but at the same moment an editor was saying: "Here's a guy that loves excitement and action. He is dedicated to adventure and doesn't mind taking any old chance. Now he's at a loose end. Let's send this bold boy to the blood bath of the Balkans. Give him a chance to show his guts." Thus I got a letter proposing to make a war correspondent out of me, and with curses in my heart I cabled acceptance. Then with my book of verse in my valise, superb as to health, but uncouth through long living near to Nature, I departed for sophisticated Europe.

As the steamer passed the mouth of the Klondike I was as blue as burning brimstone. There was the grey face of the Slide, the green summit of the Dome, the brown town clinging to the river bank. It was not beautiful, but it was very dear to me. I knew every nook and corner, so that it seemed to be a Self I was leaving behind. Poor old Town, so wistful, so weary. "You're leaving me too," it seemed to say. "Like so many, you are abandoning me. I have sheltered you, nourished you, brought you cheer, and now you disregard me and turn to others more fair." And I answered: "I swear I will come back. I will live with you again and renew the joy and comfort I have known. You have been more to me than any other of my resting places. I am grateful and will never forget. Yes, I will come back."



But I never did. Only yesterday an air-line offered to fly me up there in two days, and I refused. It would have saddened me to see dust and rust where once hummed a rousing town; hundreds where were thousands; tumbledown cabins, mouldering warehouses. . . .

And as I looked my last, my eyes rested on my cabin high on the hill. The door seemed to open and I saw a solitary figure waving his pipe in farewell—the ghost of my dead youth. No, I do not want to meet that reproachful wraith again. He might say: “You promised to do so much; you have done so little.”

And I had a further thought that saddened me even more. I felt I was not only quitting Dawson but the North itself. Nine years of my life I had given it and it was in my blood. It had inspired and sustained me, brought me fortune and a meed of fame. I thought I knew it better than most men and could express its secret spirit. Maybe I should have remained there and devoted my life to singing and writing of it. . . . “I will come back,” I said again. “I will be true to the North.” But over thirty years have passed and I have not returned. Now I know I never will.

## *Postscript*

I HAD intended this as a preface, but folks seldom read them so I am sticking it at the end, hoping it will have better luck.

One day my friend and publisher said to me, "Why don't you write the story of your life?"

"I'm only seventy," I answered. "Let me wait till I'm ninety and then perhaps I will have something interesting to say."

"If you wait till then," he said, "I may never read it."

I did not like to hear him say that. I have the cheerful conviction that I will live to be a hundred, and try to make others believe they will too; but his words set me to thinking. I took counsel with myself: "Why not have a shot at it? It's true you haven't written for ten years and you vowed you were done with inkslinging. But perhaps you haven't lost the knack entirely. Make a beginning and see how it goes."

So I did, and once started I could not control my pen. From the mists of the Past recollections importuned me. Many seemed trivial, but in the effort of self-discovery that is autobiography, who knows what is most truly revealing? In any case the surge of memories was so great that before I had reached my fortieth year I found I had made a book.

So I guess I will let it go at that. If I am allowed, I may write the second half of my life when I am eighty. Perhaps it will be the more interesting. There will be wars and radiant living, travels and escapades in every country in Europe; but most poignant of all will be my return to my home in France.

How many broken hearts will I find, how many graves? Will my beautiful house be razed to the ground, my library of three thousand volumes be burned? Will the manuscripts of three unpublished books be destroyed? I can never rewrite them, but I can rebuild my home again and take up the happy life I led for thirty years. I can aid those who have suffered and help to bring order out of chaos.

And now this book is finished I realize that I have enjoyed making it. It has been an orgy in the "egregious I," the first in my life as a writer. But I look on it most as an experiment in Escape. Remembering the Past has helped me to forget the Present. The woe and worry of war have receded into the background, and for a brief spell I have forgotten I am an escaper in the real sense—

one who twice eluded the Nazi net, in which my friends perished miserably. Had I not caught the last train, the last boat, I would have shared their fate.

Well, here I am in a city I left nearly fifty years ago as a hobo and a vagabond. For a long time I have been living in a brown shingled bungalow in the heart of Hollywood, shunning society and awaiting the hour when I can return to my own home. Here with a hale body and a high heart I have passed my seventieth year. Under a shading palm I have written this story of my youth. It is the record of a dreamer, who should have achieved failure but to whom the Gods gave a lucky break. More important than to succeed is to deserve success. Humbly I doubt my worthiness. . . .

And now let me sum up. I am still a dreamer, a recluse, a lover of liberty. I do not care if I wear rags and eat husks so long as I live in Freedom. I want every day of my life to belong to me, to do with as I please. What do I please? . . . Well, I write a little and read a lot; I exercise with enthusiasm, make music to please myself and dream prodigiously. The world can still be intriguing. I no longer care to talk much, while I am a poor listener; but I still enjoy communion with my own mind. So every evening of my life I thank the Gods for their goodness to me.

And I also thank this lovely land for its kindness to a lonely exile. Its graciousness has helped me to hope and live for that other lovely land so racked and crucified. There lies the future that is left to me, and my mission is to heal, to help, to rebuild. May I be worthy of it. . . . Good-bye.

Begun Hollywood, Hallowe'en 1943.

Ended Hollywood, Hallowe'en 1944.





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